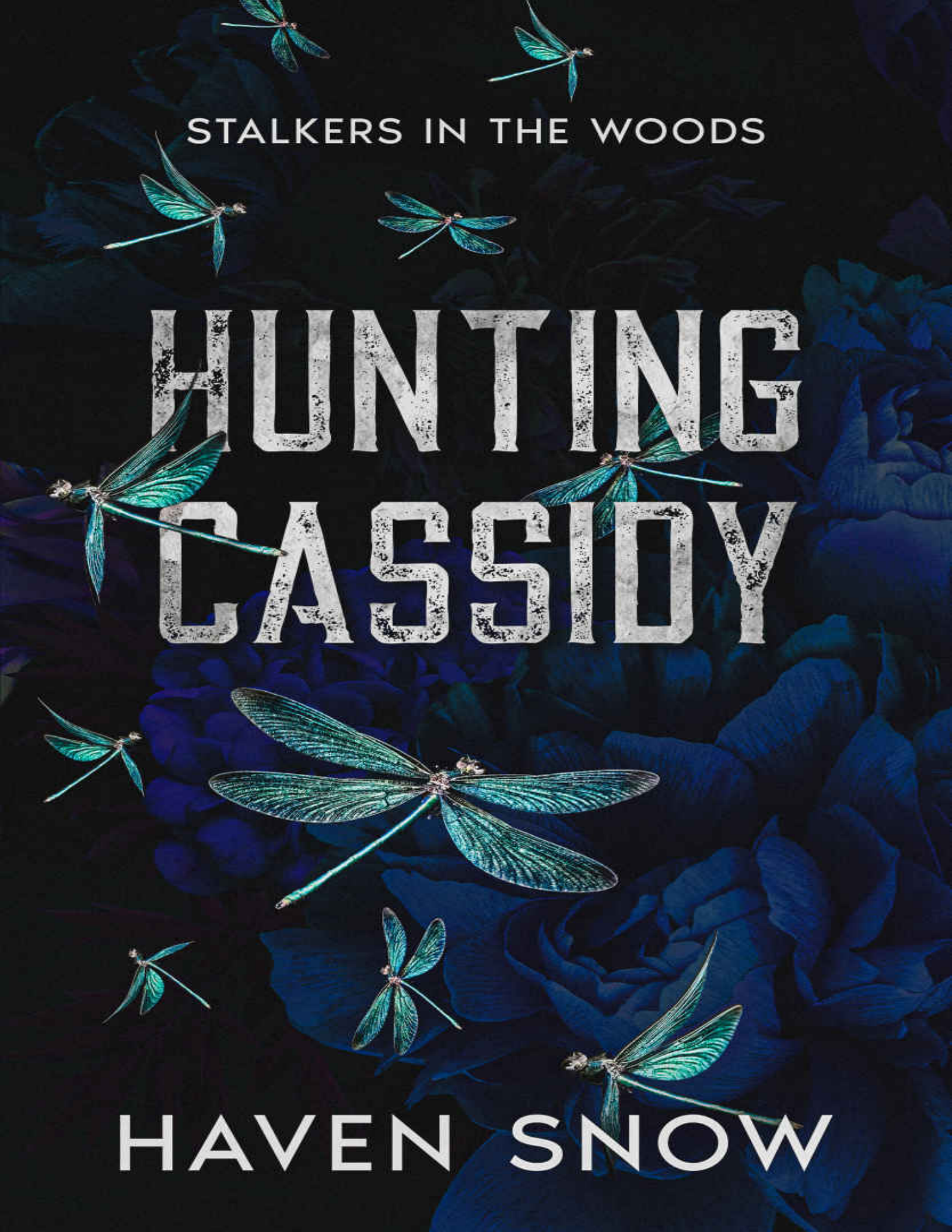
STALKERS IN THE WOODS
HUNTING CASSIDY
HAVEN SNOW

Hunting Cassidy

Stalkers in the Woods

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THIS BOOK HAS MATURE and adult themes throughout. It is a dark stalker romance. After each chapter is a journal entry. These contain Cassidy's inner thoughts. If you aren't interested in reading those, feel free to skip the page and move on to the next chapter.

Triggers are listed below and cover overarching themes. Some might not be listed.

Read at your own discretion and take care of your mental health.

Book rating: R

- **Stalking**
- **Hunting**
- **Masks**
- **Dubcon**
- **Murder**
- **Kidnapping**
- **Forced love**
- **Cutting out a B/C implant**

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For the girls working those boring jobs, living lives you hate when you really want to be stalked, kidnapped, tied up and throat fucked.
Noah's waiting for you.

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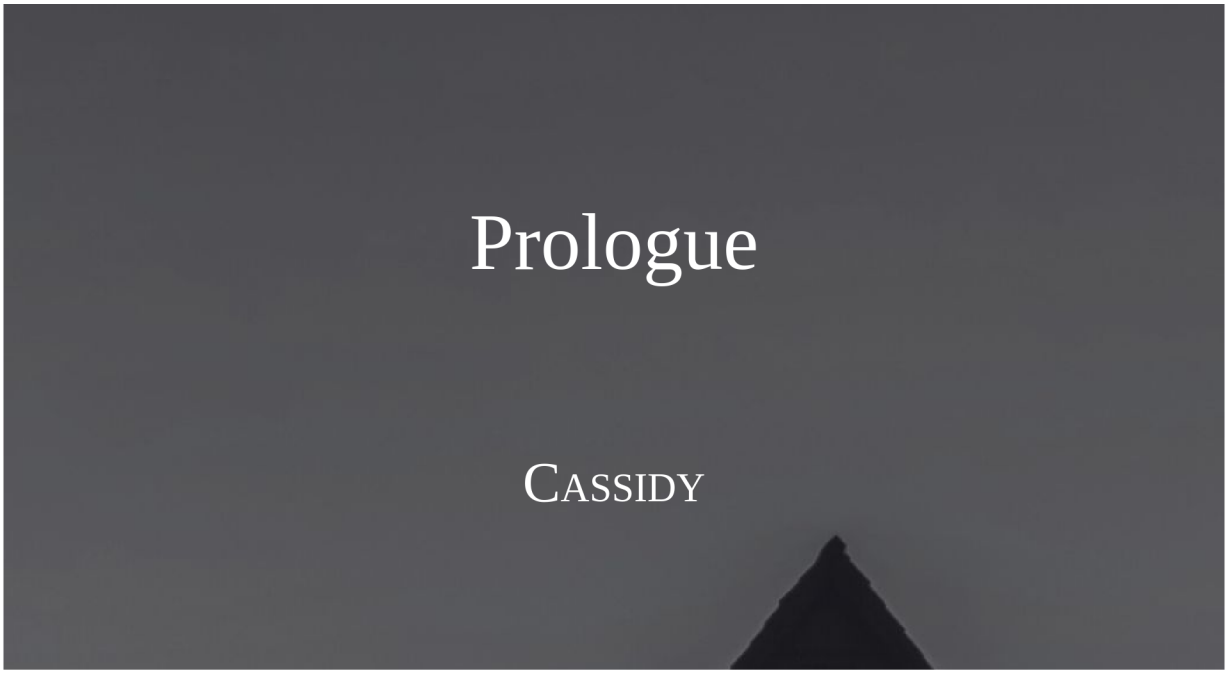

Prologue

CASSIDY

THERE ARE TIMES IN a woman’s life when she needs to decide to buck up and take charge. When the shit has hit the fan one too many times and things are spinning so far out of control, and the only thing left is to put on her big girl panties and overcome…

I’m there.

Right at that point. For so many reasons.

I’ve always wanted and wished for a love that was all consuming, burning it’s way through my body, straight into my soul. The kind of leg shaking, earth trembling, mind destroying love.

The funny thing is that I ended up settling for a partner at the law firm. He was smart. Kind enough. Brilliant in all the ways of law. But he lacked the one thing that I needed to really get going. We’ve been together just over a year at this point and I always thought things would get better. That he would… feel more.

Primal *need*. For me.

He never failed to get it up to the porn I can always hear him watching before I lay there and he crawls over me, spearing me with his cock a few times before coming on my tits and asking: “was that good?”

No, Stuart. That wasn’t good.

That was fucking awful. *Again.*

But I never challenge the status quo, never fought for more because I was a powerful business woman. I had it all. The swanky apartment, the partner label on the door, a list of clients who owed me half a million in fees. For all intents and purposes, I had everything I ever needed and more.

Except the one thing I truly wanted.

Someone who *burned* for me. That… passion. The excitement of being choked to within an inch of my life and fucked until I can barely breathe. And then… the aftercare. Sweet nothings being whispered into my ear, confessions of love, declarations that I’ll always be the center of his world.

I sigh, grabbing my journal and flicking it open to one of the last pages in the book. Glancing over at a snoring Stuart, feeling my absolute lack of satisfaction while he sleeps like a baby, I hop out of bed and walk to my kitchen. Flicking on the light and dimming it so it’s still dark enough not to fully wake me, I begin.

Once again, Stuart can’t fuck me worth a damn. Once again, he’s a two pump chump who empties his balls on my chest and leaves me to wipe it with my shirt. Once again, he’s sound asleep while I feel like an old hag with cobwebs growing between her legs, because why in the fuck can’t he just go down on me and get me off?

I suppose it doesn’t matter. I guess this is just what life is. One sad fuck after another. But at least he’s stable. He’s secure. He is successful.

The whole package, really.

Except for the way he doesn't touch me.

But those fantasies are just deranged anyway. What type of lawyer wants to be spanked, strung up and hunted? None, that's what. It's unnatural. It's unhealthy.

And yet… I can't stop myself from wanting rough hands forcing my legs apart, forcing me to take his cock over and over until I'm out of my mind with pleasure.

I pause, pushing the pen into the page, leaving a big ink blot before sighing and changing my tune.

No use in wishing for it though. He will likely propose soon and then that's that.

I have a big case coming up. Against Mr. Cross. One of his numbered companies, the ones he houses the baby companies in, has been accused of polluting the river and dumping chemicals in it. That river leads to a lake which gets pumped and cleaned for people to drink! It's abhorrent. It's one of my first biggest cases. I've had lots of big cases, but this is my biggest.

If I win against Mr. Cross, I can prove my place at the firm. I think I have it in the bag. The evidence is damning. He didn't even try to hide the barrels leaking toxic sludge onto the embankments and then into the water.

So many people are sick. The hospital is overrun. It's a nightmare. If I win, I win for all of them. The money will treat their water, fix the river and help them heal from this fucking shitshow.

He's a bad dude. Who cares about money more than the value of human life?

Bad people, that's who.

But I have every intention of making an example out of him and making sure that my name is right up there with the activists of my time.

Footsteps interrupt my journalling.

“Hey, baby, can’t sleep?” Stuart’s voice is rough around the edges as he leans against the door.

“Yeah, just doing some journalling, I’ll be in bed soon.” I try to smile, but I can’t. The outline of his cock strains against his sweats and I know he wants ‘round two.’

He grins and palms his cock. “Wake me up if I fall asleep.”

“Sure thing.”

I won’t.

Because I don’t want to.

God, my head is pounding. I need a damn break from all of this. I need to just get away and not think about cases, or Stuart. Maybe I should call Monique and see if she wants to go ski or something.

I lift my pen from the page to chew on the end. It’ll have to be next year. This case might take a while with how complex it is. Putting the pen back on the paper, I make myself a note:

Call Monique.

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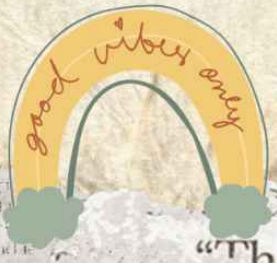
What type of lawyer wants to spanked, strung up and hunted? None, that's what. It's unnatural. It's unhealthy.
And yet... I can't stop myself from wanting rough hands forcing my legs apart, forcing me to take his cock over and over until I'm out of my mind with pleasure.

I think I hate Stuart and all the ways he doesn't fuck me right...



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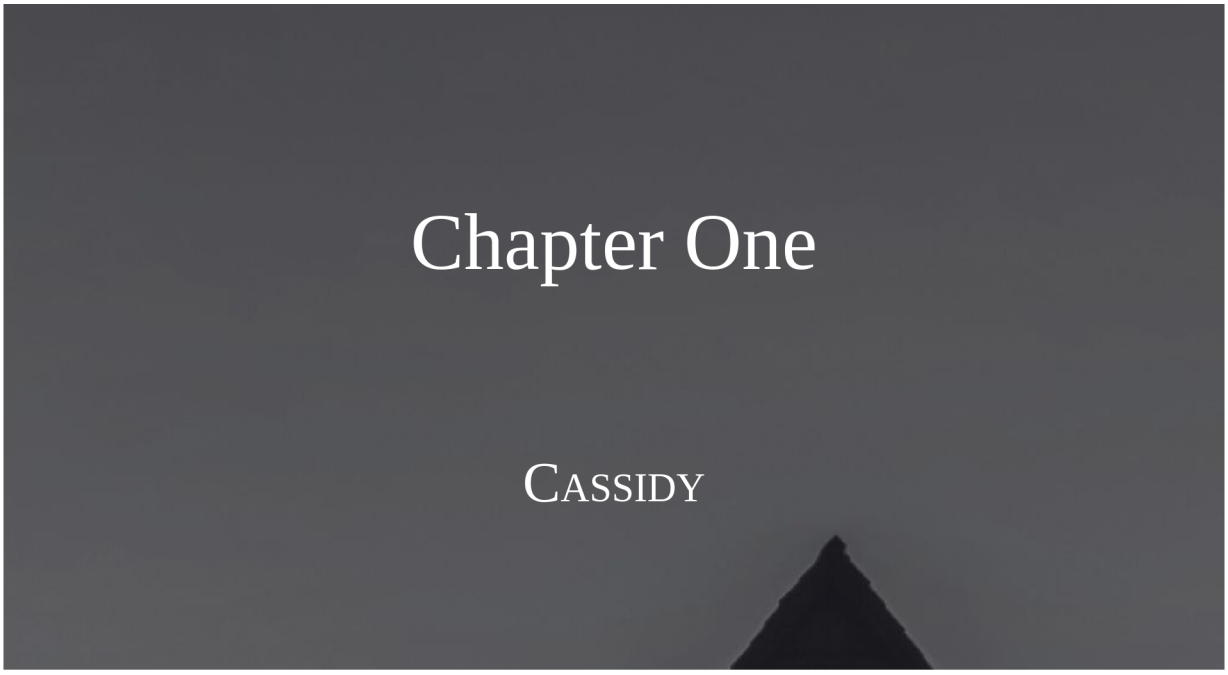

Chapter One

CASSIDY

MY GOD MY BONES ache. Not in the ‘freshly fucked’ kind of way. In the way that ‘I’m getting older and I need to start going to the gym more consistently.’ Forcing my feet onto the floor, I drag my ass to the bathroom and stare into my dirty mirror.

These late nights are killing me. Slowly, but killing me, nonetheless.

My phone pings. *Oh look, three more emails to answer before I go crash in the woods for a week.* Monique had put me onto this retreat for adults. Like a place where we can just go and relax. Hike, swim, eat food I don’t have to prepare or get delivered. It sounded nice at the time she suggested it, so I booked and now I’m sort of regretting it.

I wasn’t built for the remote life, but she *insisted* it’s exactly what I need. Especially after last weeks episode where I had a migraine for three days straight.

Shit is hitting the fan at work, with clients coming out my ass. It was a sudden influx because I won a major case and now everyone wanted a slice of my defense skills.

I heave a sigh. A break is just what I need to get some R&R.

Throwing a pair of pants on, I head to my home office and open my laptop. It takes a second to wake up, just like me. My coffee maker sputters as it pushes out nectar from the gods. I have it set on a timer. Seven a.m. every morning. It’s the only thing that works to wake me enough to get through the mountains of paperwork I need to address. My eyes drift out the window as it runs through its startup routine.

Denver’s skyline, dwarfed by the distant Rockies, is bright against the early morning smog. Most people are still buried in their comforters, but I’ve been fighting sleep demons since 4 a.m., answering emails and hounding partners about overdue briefs. I miss being excited about those things.

The soft ding of an incoming email snaps me back to the here and now—or was this one already there? It’s from Stuart, straight to business:

"Don’t go off-grid for too long. The partners are antsy that you’re leaving in the middle of the influx."

No "hello," no "how are you," nothing that might suggest he remembers we used to be engaged. My fingers hover over the keyboard before I tell him what he wants to hear:

"I’ll have cell service."

I’m such a pushover.

It’s pathetic. *I’m* pathetic.

The doorbell rings just as I hit send. Must be the driver service with my car for this little retreat-slash-existential-crisis. Apparently, they want to ‘fully immerse’ us in the experience, which means making sure we can’t escape when we feel the need to get back to work early. Which is a blessing, I suppose. Knowing me, I’d for sure leave after a couple of days. Especially with Stuart riding my ass and irritating me half to death.

I swear under my breath and head toward the door, grabbing my jacket from the kitchen chair on the way. As I open it, a blast of crisp morning air greets me. The car is nice. Sleek and silver, it’s freshly washed, with droplets still clinging to the surface. I sign off on the paperwork, while the driver waits for me to show him where my bag is.

My suitcase is already packed because I’m Type A enough to hate last-minute anything. It sits by the door like a reprimand for all my second-guessing. I add a few more essentials—a stack of unread paperbacks, extra chargers—then haul it all outside. He grabs them from my hands and shoves them in the trunk before opening the door and ushering me inside.

Sliding into the rental’s leather seat gives me an unexpected thrill of freedom, or maybe that's just caffeine doing its job. Either way, I settle in while he guns the engine and heads for the mountains.

The city fades behind me as he drives up twisting roads carved into rock and forest. Each mile pulls me further from deadlines and clients and Stuart’s shitty emails. The layers of tension slowly peel away with each turn until the GPS cheerfully announces that we’re nearly there.

Pine Ridge Wilderness Retreat sprawls out before me like a fucking postcard. The main lodge is rustic and massive with a wall of windows reflecting the deep greens and blues of the surrounding forest. Several smaller cabins peek out from between the trees, smoke curling lazily from their chimneys. It’s so damn perfect it makes me suspicious.

The driver pulls up to the lodge, stopping in front of the doors. A woman with a welcoming smile and a clipboard waits to greet me. She’s like every camp counselor stereotype wrapped into one—plaid shirt, ponytail, and an earnestness that feels alien.

I almost feel like a damn kid being dropped off for summer camp.

“Cassidy Warren?” Her voice is bright enough to burn the cynicism right out of me. Almost. There’s an undercurrent of fakeness that seems to color her greeting. Like some sort of robot, going through the motions.

“That’s me,” I say, trying to match her enthusiasm but falling short.

“Great! We’re thrilled you could make it. I’m Dana.” She beckons me inside and hands me a packet full of schedules and maps as she talks my ear off about all the activities lined up for the week. Yoga at dawn, organic meals, meditative hiking trails. It’s overwhelming in its optimism.

I nod along like I’m completely on board but keep glancing toward where I just saw my suitcase disappear behind the log-lined charm of the lodge. Dana catches my drift, thank fuck.

“Let’s get you settled in your cabin,” she chirps before leading me back outside to one of the neat gravel paths. “It’s a bit of a walk, but I’m sure you’ll love the privacy. Yours is cabin 11.”

Privacy sounds good. Privacy sounds like exactly what I need. But as we walk, my eyes dart around the forest, half-expecting Stuart to leap out from behind a tree and demand that I finish a motion to compel.

“Here we are,” Dana announces when we reach a small cabin with cedar shingles and a porch swing. It looks cozy enough to suffocate me.

“Thanks,” I say, though she’s already bouncing back to the lodge, her ponytail swinging like she’s in some goddamn shampoo commercial.

Inside, the cabin feels somehow too charming and too remote all at once. The wood-paneled walls are beautiful, but they close in on me like they know all my secrets. A fire crackles in the corner.

Of course it’s in a bougie stone fireplace.

I spot my suitcase just inside the door and resist the urge to check if everything is still there. Kicking off my shoes, I flop onto the couch, which

sighs under my weight like it’s relieved someone finally showed up.

I stare at the ceiling, trying to tell my brain to shut the fuck up and stop wanting to check my phone. But old habits die hard and before long I’m scrolling through email after email, ignoring the ones from Stuart demanding to know if I can write an opening argument for a dog food company being sued for plastics in the kibble. I toss the phone onto the coffee table, determined to at least pretend I'm unplugged.

The windows are big and let in too much light. The forest is just beyond them, a thick wall of trees. I’d never been into the outdoors, and yet I’m here. I should at least *try* to enjoy myself. Nothing moves out there except shadows, but I feel weirdly watched anyway, so I close the curtains.

I pick up one of the paperbacks and try to lose myself in someone else's drama for a change. A knock on the door makes me jump.

Who the hell? Dana must have forgotten to tell me something important about how refreshing nature is or some bullshit.

But it’s not Dana when I open the door. It’s a guy, standing there like he’s been expecting me. He’s tall and broad-shouldered with dark eyes that settle on mine and holds them a second too long. He towers over me and muscles strain from the sleeves of his shirt. It’s obvious he takes care of his body. A five o’clock shadow spreads over his chin and he sweeps his dark hair out of his face as a piece falls into his eyes.

He’s handsome. In a weird, rugged kind of way. Like the type to just put me over his shoulder and walk me into a cave or something. He’s every girl’s lumberjack wet dream.

I shake my head to try and dispel the dirty thoughts that rise in my mind and wait for him to say something.

“Cassidy,” he says, my name rolling off his tongue like we’re old friends.

“Yeah?” I answer, wary and wondering if he’s here to tell me about some mandatory trust-building circle.

“Welcome to Pine Ridge.” A slow smile spreads across his face, confident and he cocks his head.

At least he isn’t pretending to be chipper. I relax half a notch, though he’s still got this intense vibe that makes the back of my neck tingle.

“Thanks,” I say. “And you are?”

He doesn’t answer right away, just stands there, almost as if contemplating if he wants to answer. Then he lets out a low chuckle, like we’re sharing an inside joke.

“Noah,” he says finally. “I’m the hiking guide.”

Hiking guide? He looks like he’d rather take climb me than show me the mountain.

A rebound fuck wouldn’t be a bad thing, honestly.

“Oh,” I manage, trying to sound unimpressed and not like he just threw me off balance. “Nice to meet you.”

“You’re here alone?” It sounds casual, but his eyes darken as he asks.

“Pretty much the point of a retreat, right?” I retort. Maybe more bite in my voice than necessary.

His smile widens, like he’s amused by my attempt at sarcasm. “If you need anything,” Noah says, leaning against the doorframe and making it look like a magazine shoot for flannel enthusiasts, “I’m around.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I start to close the door, but not before catching the way he glances past me into the cabin like he’s taking inventory of everything inside.

Including me.

The latch clicks shut, and I stand there, wondering what the hell just happened. That was way too much intensity for a welcome.

It's quiet again, except for the way the wood creaks every time the wind blows. I sit back down, trying to read but only seeing Noah's piercing eyes scanning my face like he was memorizing me. I throw the book across the room in frustration.

The cabin feels like it's shrinking around me. *I need to get out of here. I fucking miss my dark roast coffee and my sectional with views of the city.* I grab my coat, yank open the door, and head out into the woods without any particular plan. If I'm lucky, a bear will eat me and then I will never have to worry about anything ever again.

A gravel path stretches ahead, winding between towering trees. It's cold, but the air feels good against my skin, clearing my head more with each breath.

I can do this. It's only a week. Just… breathe. In, out, in, out.

I walk fast, as if I can outrun whatever restless energy chased me out here. The path curves and splits off into different trails marked by wooden signs with names like "Silent Fern" and "Whispering Creek." They all sound equally pretentious, so I pick one at random and keep going.

Everything here has some kind of weird forestry name attached to it. One of the signs has a crudely etched picture of a waterfall with the name "Pinecone Falls." *Stupid name. It should be something like Rushing River or Wandering Waterfall.* I snort. Maybe I should have become a marketing expert instead of a lawyer.

I lose track of time as the trail leads uphill, past moss-covered boulders and fallen logs that look suspiciously arranged for maximum quaintness. It's beautiful out here, I can't lie.

I round a bend and stop short when I see him.

Noah.

He's a few feet up the trail from where I am, standing with his back to me as if he didn't hear my footsteps. Or the cursing that occurred when I stubbed my toe on a boulder. For a second, I think about slipping away and going back down the hill, but he turns before I can decide. Almost like he knew I was there all along.

"Hey," he calls out, closing the distance between us with an easy stride that suggests he spends all his time in these woods. "You found the Cedar Ridge trail."

"Lucky me," I say, trying to sound more sarcastic than breathless. "I thought I was at "Green Fern" or whatever."

"Yeah, they all connect." He looks me over, and I have the strange feeling he's seeing more than just my wind-reddened cheeks and messy hair. "I didn't expect to run into anyone out here," he says.

"I could say the same." Except not really. Something about him gives me the sense I'll be seeing a lot more of him than just this once.

He grins and nods up the trail. "Want some company?"

No, no I don't, but the words don't come out. Instead, we fall into step next to each other. He walks in a way that makes me feel self-conscious about my city-girl awkwardness in the wilderness.

"So," I ask after a few moments of silence, "you just wander around hoping to run into guests?"

"Something like that." He smirks.

We walk without talking for a while, and maybe it's because of his presence or maybe I'm just getting used to the woods, but I start to relax. It smells… new. Fresh.

“How long are you up here?” Noah’s voice breaks the quiet.

“Just a week. I leave on Sunday,” I reply, not sure why it feels like an important detail. “Trying to unplug.”

He nods like he already knew this. “Think you can handle the quiet?”

I shrug. “A bear might eat me first.”

He laughs; a low rumble that almost makes me smile despite myself. “I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.”

There’s an edge to his voice that makes me look at him. He meets my gaze with those intense eyes, holding it until I look away. It’s… unsettling. The way he looks at me, I mean. Like he wants to eat me.

Maybe it’s not the bears I need to worry about…

The path gets steeper, and I focus on not slipping on the damp leaves underfoot.

“Why Pine Ridge?” he asks once we reach a flatter stretch.

“A friend recommended it.” I pause, wondering how much to say. “She thought it would be good for me.”

“She’s right.” Noah’s response is quick, like he didn’t even need to think twice. “This place changes you.”

Weirdly enough, I believe him. Though maybe not in the way he means. I already miss the spa.

I let the thought pass, and we continue up the trail, his stride effortless while mine feels clumsy in comparison. Stumbling over moss, rocks and twigs. Like a dumbass. He stays close enough that I catch his woodsy scent. I like it, despite my reservations about him.

“Why didn’t your friend join you?” he asks casually.

“Nah, I need this time. It’s not something she’d enjoy.”

“Too bad for her. Lucky for me.”

I stop short at his words, and he walks a few steps past before turning back with that unreadable smile. My heart pounds harder than it should from a little hike. “You always this intense?” I ask, trying to make it sound light.

“Only when I see something I really want,” he says, watching me for my reaction.

There’s no retort for that kind of confidence.

Noah waits for me to catch up, then falls into step a little closer than before. We walk until the trees thin out and a rocky overlook opens up, revealing a view that almost steals my breath away. The mountains roll out beneath us, layered in shades of blue and gray, the retreat barely a dot in the distance. *Damn, I walked far.* I feel small, but not in a bad way.

Noah lets me take it in for a minute before he speaks. “Worth the hike?”

I nod, unable to come up with anything more articulate. “It’s amazing,” I finally manage.

He leans against a massive boulder like he has all the time in the world, eyes never leaving my face. “Glad you think so.”

We stand there as the wind picks up, sweeping my hair across my face and making me shiver. He notices immediately, shrugging off his jacket and holding it out to me. “Here.”

I hesitate. I’m not used to people looking out for me like that. “I’m fine,” I lie through chattering teeth.

“Take it.” There’s a command in his voice that makes it clear he’s not taking no for an answer. Reluctantly, I slip it on.

It’s warm from his body and smells like him. It feels like wearing someone else’s skin but strangely comforting at the same time.

“Thanks,” I say, though it comes out more like a question than gratitude.

He smiles again, “Should we head back? It’s almost lunch. Spaghetti today. You can sit with me.”

“Are you asking me on a date?” The words slip out before I can reel them back in. I meant them as a joke, but the look that passes over his face is serious.

“Depends how you feel about pasta.”

“Wouldn’t say no to carbs.” I take one last look at the view before turning back toward the trail. Noah stays close as we retrace our steps, his hand on my elbow so I don’t trip.

The sun climbs higher, filtering through branches in golden shafts. My toes are numb from the cold, but the rest of me feels strangely alive. Maybe being out in buttfuck nowhere won’t be so bad.

“So, what do you do when you’re not harassing unsuspecting hikers?” I ask as we walk.

“Mostly guiding,” he says. “Leading hikes, showing guests around. Helping them find what they’re looking for.”

“And what’s that?”

He gives me a sideways glance. “Depends on the guest.”

He’s good at this—answering without really answering. I try another angle. “How long have you been working here?”

“A while.” He seems amused by my string of questions. “Long enough to know these trails better than most people know their own streets.”

That much is obvious by the way he moves through the forest. “Do you ever miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“The city.”

“Nah. I don’t miss the city.”

We fall into a silence as we keep heading down the mountain and towards the main lodge for lunch.

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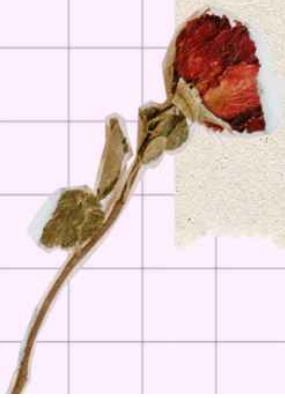
today is the first day here, and already, Stuart has called like 7 times and wont stop emailing me. He says we need to talk. Maybe we do. Ugh. I am so over him! In other news. MMMM dream hiker daddy vibes Noah. Now he is a rebound I might consider. He is a little intense though. I would for sure need to make sure he understands its just a fling.



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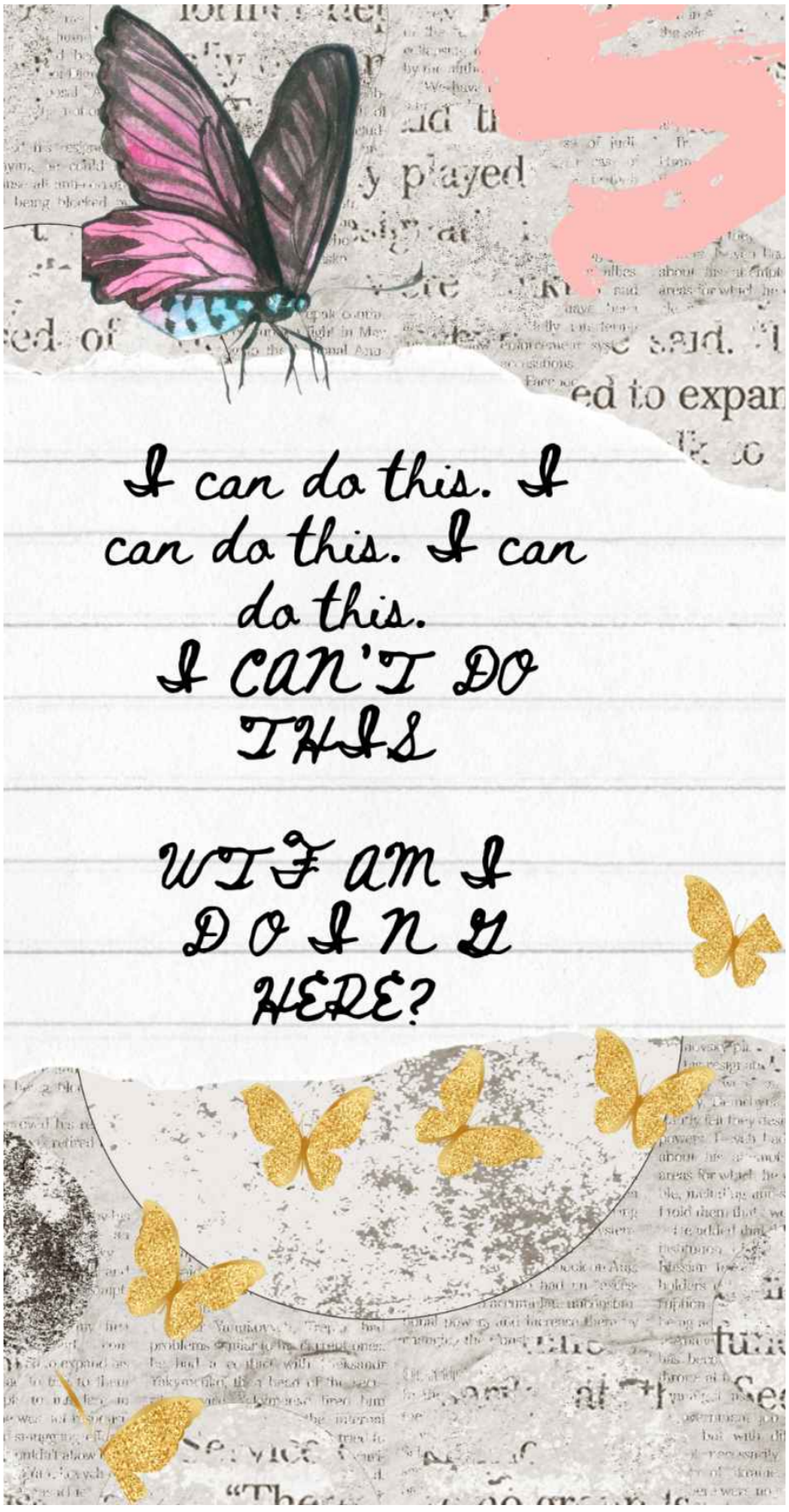
I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.
I CAN'T DO THIS
WTF AM I DOING HERE?

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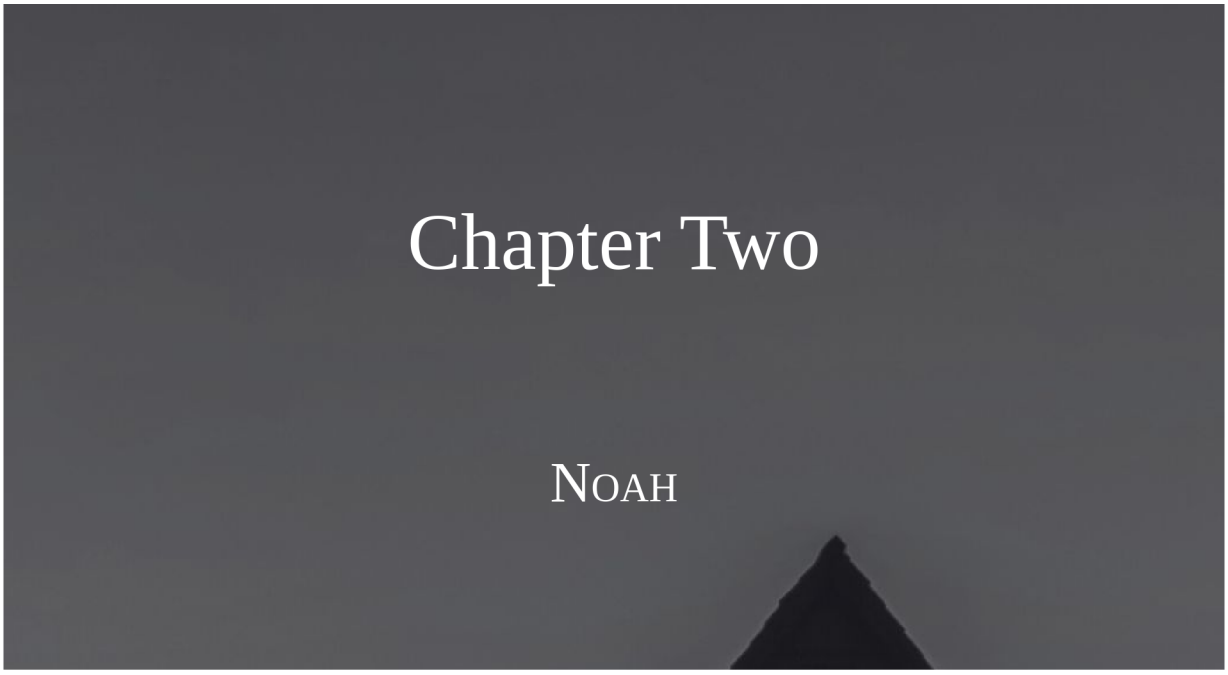

Chapter Two

Noah

SHE’S *PERFECT.*

The way her ass fills her pants as she walks down the mountain. My eyes are glued to her.

Awkward and unsure, not yet used to the terrain. But she doesn’t give up, even when she stumbles. Her hair spills in wild, brown waves, and she probably thinks it’s a mess. I think it’s beautiful. Up close, her green eyes have flecks of gold in them with a yellow ring around her iris. She’s got a dusting of freckles over her nose, ones she tries to hide with makeup. She almost slips but I grab her arm to steady her, a grateful smile crossing her face.

Cassidy Warren.

I’ve been waiting for this moment for an entire year. Her name alone hooked me when I saw her on the docket during a major case against my father, so naturally, I started digging. I wanted to be prepared. Wanted to know everything so I could help my father win his case.

But something changed the minute I saw her. She had been fixing her hair in a make-up mirror and the way she smacked her lips together did it. My searches on her proved that Cassidy was phenomenal. Corporate lawyer. City slicker. Recently dumped—I may or may not have had something to do with that. Cheated on her with some fake bitch. Cassidy is a woman who needs a change of scenery, a fresh start—though I doubt she really knows what that means yet. It took a bit of searching to piece her life together, but I didn't mind the work. Not when it comes to someone like Cassidy.

She's even better in person than she was on paper. After my father's case (spoiler, Cassidy won), I started following her. Finding out her favorite spots, the type of coffee she drinks, the size clothing she wears.

Eventually that wasn't enough, so I cut myself a key to her apartment and let myself in whenever she was at the office, and a few times late at night while she slept. My underwear collection has grown exponentially. I've never been one to enjoy collecting underwear, but with her, I wanted her scent near me.

I was ready to make my move long ago, but then my father died and everything exploded. His businesses were being sued left, right and center, and I had to find a way to stop the bleeding. I did, and the estate passed over to me, but not without a long and arduous legal battle. There's still a few loose ends, a company I wasn't aware of, but I'll gain control of it, like I have the others.

"So, tell me about you." I say, wanting to hear her voice as much as I can before we hit the end of our trail. It has this lilt that drives me wild. She's cynical, jaded, but that will change when she see's what I have in store for her.

She talks about the city like it’s some kind of cage she’s escaped from, but she doesn’t see how much it’s still wrapped around her. Then in the same breath she says how much she loves it there. The busy life, the non-stop race to the top. Her socials are filled with her view from her place, but there’s a sadness in her eyes. She doesn’t love her life. Not like I love mine.

I can pinpoint the exact moment in time when the light left her eyes. It’s as if one day, she was all sunshine and roses, and the next the joy inside her had dimmed. And theoretically, it was my fault. I put Stuart on the path to finding the woman he’d destroy her with, but I don’t regret it.

Because here, she will find that love for life again. That spark will return, and she will burst open with the light I know is inside of her. I will fix her.

I’ve just been waiting for the perfect woman to share all this with. To give the world to. And she’s the one. She just doesn’t know it yet.

She will, though. She’ll see everything by the time I’m done.

We reach the lodge, and I keep my hand on her elbow to steady her on the last stretch. The dining area is already filling up with other guests. They’re all so boring, compared to her. She’s got more grit than most of them put together.

“I need to grab something from my cabin,” she says, pausing at the door. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“I thought we were having a date.” I say, trying not to show my irritation.

“Yeah… uh…” she twirls her hair around her fingers before biting her lip. I stuff down the urge to pull it out before she hurts herself.

“Yes?”

“I… need to get my phone. Stuart has probably emailed me a hundred times. It’s… things are busy with work, and I need to be present.”

Irritation flares. *Stuart.* It makes me angry that she's even thinking about him when she's here with me. He's a nobody. A nothing. "No. You need to eat. You also need to hydrate. Food and water first, then you can answer your phone. Though, you won't get the full benefits of the retreat if you stay glued to that thing."

She sucks in a breath, her eyes narrowing. "My job is important you know."

"Not more important than your health."

She hesitates, and I watch her weigh the truth of it. She's smart enough to know I'm right. She doesn't push it, not entirely.

"Lunch and water then," she says with a quiet sigh.

I follow her inside, claiming a table by the window so we can see the mountains. My mountains. This place is my kingdom, and she's my queen, whether she knows it or not. She will rule this place beside me.

Soon.

Cassidy sits across from me, looking around at the other guests like she's trying to memorize their faces. Her lawyer brain working overtime. "Seems like you get all types here."

"We do." I let her wonder about them and keep my eyes fixed on her. I don't give a fuck about anyone else. Not when she's in front of me.

Our kitchen staff come by, putting our food in front of us. The spaghetti is nothing fancy, but it's hearty and good. I watch her twirl noodles around her fork, watch her eyes widen as she takes the first bite. The Ridge might be a little rougher than what she's used to, but we do things right here.

She devours a full plate before she realizes it and looks up sheepishly. "Guess I needed that."

"I noticed," I say with a grin.

Her cheeks flush pink again, and I love seeing color in them.

Cassidy drinks her water slowly, like she's trying to make up for every dehydrated moment of the past year. I refill her glass when it's empty, and she doesn't protest. She's letting me take care of her already.

Such a good girl.

"Okay," she says, wiping her mouth with a napkin and leaning back in her chair. "I'll admit it. That hit the spot."

"I know what you need better than you do," I say. There's a joke in my voice, but we both hear the truth under it.

She doesn't look away this time; she meets my gaze head on. "What makes you so sure?"

"Call it instinct."

"Instinct?" She taps her fingers on the table, calculating something behind those sharp blue eyes. "Or… are you stalking me or something." She laughs, joking about my very real addiction to her.

The way she says it, like she's trying to catch me out sends a thrill through me. She's trying to figure me out, see my angle. There's practically smoke billowing out of her as her brain works overtime to understand me. I smile at her again and shrug. Let her wonder about me. Let her try her very best to understand who I am, what my goal is here… with her. It'll keep her interested.

"No stalking necessary. It's just intuition. I watch people for a living. You're not the only observant one," I say.

Her expression shifts like she's not sure whether to be impressed or scared.

"Well, Noah." She draws my name out, tasting it, testing me with it. "Thanks for lunch."

There's a finality in her voice that she thinks will end things, but we're just getting started. She's curious, wanting to dig into my psyche even as she

pushes back her chair and stands.

I stand too, closing the space between us. “You’re welcome,” I say, my voice low enough that only she can hear. “Dinners at seven.”

She catches the meaning in my words and pauses before nodding slowly. She doesn’t commit to more than that, but I’ll take it. For now.

She walks out of the lodge with her shoulders set like she’s braced for something. She is, whether she knows it or not.

I watch until she’s lost to the shadows of the trees, then make my way to the kitchen. Time to head to the back. I slip into the hallway where the staff have their spaces and push open a door marked Employees Only.

My real office is in a cabin half a mile from here, but I’ve found it’s better to have a few ‘crash pads’ for when the muse strikes. Plus, this is a shared space, and the others might start questioning me if I put up photos from my investigation. The setup is simple: a desk, an old laptop, and stacks of notebooks filled with my handwriting. All kept in the locked filing cabinet that only I have the key for. There’s nothing *damning* in them, but still, keeping the Nosy Nellies away from my extracurricular activities is in the best interests of everyone.

I sit down and pull up the nearest notebook. The page is already marked with her name: Cassidy Warren—Guest Intake. Every note about her is carefully recorded in my writing: Day 1 – Arrived at 9:15 a.m. Settled in, hiked. Had spaghetti and hydrated. It’s not entirely necessary for me to be making these notes, but having a document filled with my observations about her will make a beautiful gift to her one day.

I even have photos of her that I can give her. One’s that my cameras caught of her at just the right times. Like when she looked out her bedroom window at something outside and smiled. A big, beautiful, genuine smile. It

is one of my favorite photos. With a sigh, I wonder what she's doing right now. Grabbing my laptop, I open it with a click.

The screen lights up with feeds from several trail cameras I've set around the property. Most show nothing interesting—the usual parade of deer and bored couples—but I toggle through them till I find her.

She's moving quickly through the trees toward her cabin, her hair wild around her shoulders where she let it fall free again. There's a tension in her steps like she's trying to outrun something, trying to escape what's closing in on her.

But as long as she stays here, she won't outrun me.

I switch off the feeds, fighting the urge to check the ones inside her cabin and close the laptop. There's a reason she was put in cabin eleven. I had Creed set up a top-of-the-line security system inside that one. Mini cameras, high tech night vision. There's not an inch of space in those walls where she can hide from me. She'll need time to process today, time to come to terms with perfect I am for her. It's only day one, and fighting the need to claim her is proving more difficult than I thought it would. I want to see her, watch her, have her around me.

Only, it's too soon to push for much more right now. She's a fragile, wounded bird, trying to find her path in life. Once she understands that the city isn't her calling, it will be easy to patch her up and build her for a life with me here.

At Pine Ridge.

A knock interrupts me, and Dana peeks her head inside. "Noah? We've got a group wanting to see the peek, do you have time now?"

I nod, packing away my personal stuff and locking the filing cabinet before following Dana out. I want to tell her to fuck off, to leave me with my

thoughts, but duty calls.

The afternoon is bright, and the group of hikers is waiting by the trailhead. A mixture of families and couples—all of them city-dwellers looking for an adventure to brag about around their office coffee pots. They chatter loudly, and it grates against my nerves.

The wilds are for *quiet.*

Dana flashes me a knowing smile as I join the group, and she starts introducing me to the group. I nod and smile, playing the perfectly good host. Going over the safety rules, everyone is eager and antsy, so we head out.

“I’m going to come with on this one, if that’s okay, Noah.” She looks at me, a blush creeping up her cheek.

“Yeah, for sure.” I say before taking point despite the fact that I don’t want her to come. I know what she wants. We’ve fucked a few times, but that’s in the past now. She was never meant to fill the shoes of the *one.* A bed warmer. That’s all she ever was, but she clearly hadn’t taken the fucking hint.

The chatter fades as we wind our way up the mountain. By the time we reach the lookout point, everyone’s quiet, panting from exertion and finally noticing just how far from civilization they really are.

“Wow,” one of them gasps. “It’s amazing.”

I give them their moment before launching into my practiced spiel about the peaks and valleys in front of us, sounding exactly like what they want—an experienced guide with deep knowledge.

I’m half disappointed Cassidy wasn’t part of the group, but she was probably exhausted from our hike earlier. I fight back a smile as I think of

her. Her voice, challenging me over lunch: Or… are you stalking me or something.

Incredulity mixed with something else. Curiosity maybe. Intrigue.

I wonder which will win out by dinner time.

The group takes their selfies and panoramas, and we make our way back down, Dana bringing up the rear like she's shepherding a flock of expensive fleece-wearing sheep. By the time we reach the trailhead again, it's late afternoon and long shadows stretch across the gravel paths. My thoughts have gone back to Cassidy numerous times and I'm itching to get to my cabin and shower before dinner.

"You're such a pro," Dana says, flicking her hair as she splits off toward the lodge. "I just loooove when you lead. You're such a natural."

I nod absently, already calculating how much time I have before seven o'clock rolls around.

The light is fading as I head back to my own place to clean up before dinner. Cabin 12 is remote enough that I can watch without anyone watching back, but close enough that I can be wherever I need to be on short notice. I also have a direct view into her windows with my binoculars.

Inside, it looks more lived-in than any retreat rental has a right to be: maps, stacks of books about survival skills and pictures of my girl on my bedroom walls. I live here during the season, but it's temporary. I'm just adding finishes touches to what will become my new home. Owning the place means, I can do whatever the hell I wanted. I just have to lead some spoiled city rats up the mountain whenever asked. Tossing my jacket onto a chair, I check myself in the mirror. Rugged charm goes a long way with women like Cassidy; they think they'll be able to tame me until they realize it's taming them instead.

And she will be tamed.

I don’t ever take no for an answer, though she is the only obsession of mine that I plan to keep. The last one failed spectacularly and I don’t intend to have such bad judgement choices again. That’s why watching her and being forced to wait an entire year for this moment wasn’t such a bad thing. It helped me determine the validity of my gut feeling.

I had been right.

There was something… different about her.

Stripping my clothes, I head to my bathroom, starting the shower.

It’s half past six by the time I’m dressed and slipping out into the cooling night. The stream nearby rushes with the rain from last night, and the air has a bite to it that sends most people scrambling for the warmth of the lodge’s fireplaces. Most people, but not her. She marched straight into the cold this morning and it was then that I *knew.* She’d fit in perfectly here.

I make it to the main lodge in minutes and pull open the heavy oak doors. The dining room is buzzing, filled with guests comparing their day’s adventures and clinking glasses of wine from vineyards they probably can’t pronounce. But it’s just noise to me, background static as my eyes scan the tables.

There she is.

Tucked away at a corner table, her expression pensive as she stares out toward the sky beyond those big windows. It takes all my self-control not to go to her right away, not to claim that empty chair across from her like I rightfully should. I’ve waited most of the day; another few minutes won’t kill me.

At least, that’s what I tell myself.

I move toward the bar instead. A few of the other guides are gathered there, laughing too loudly and throwing back beers like they just got off a double shift at a factory instead of leading tourists through paradise.

“Noah!” One of them claps me on the back as I approach. “Heard you got stuck with Dana’s group today.”

“Yeah,” I say, keeping my tone light while my attention drifts back toward Cassidy and I tap the bar to get the bartenders attention.

“She’s been asking about you,” he smirks. “Think she wants you to take her on a private tour.”

I shrug him off and order a scotch, neat. “I’m booked up,” I say, eyes flicking over his shoulder to where Cassidy still sits.

Her gaze catches mine then—a brief flash before she looks away, her cheeks red, obvious even from this distance.

Rio slides my drink to me, and I grab it. The scotch burns smooth and warm down my throat. I cough before ordering two red wines. One for me. One for her.

She shifts in her seat, runs a hand through that hair again until it falls wild around her shoulders like it was meant to be. Like I want it to be when she’s finally underneath me.

I make my way over to her and put the glass in front of her. “Good evening, Cass. I’m glad you decided to show.”

She looks down before raising her eyes to look at me. “Yeah. I had a nap. Did some work things. Ended up being starving so figured why not. Do you know what dinner is tonight?”

“Rainbow trout,” I say, sitting down. “Better than anything you’d get in the city.”

She laughs, a little too brightly. “And here I thought we’d be eating deer or something.”

“Give it time. We’ve got the whole week.” My eyes are on her, watching for any hint of discomfort or interest. Wanting both in equal measure.

She sips the wine, fidgeting with the stem of the glass. She’s nervous, but there’s something else there too—a spark that she can’t quite hide. “You really live out here, don’t you?”

“It’s not so bad once you get used to it.” I lean back, hoping she will see the merits of living out here. “Seems like you’re adjusting pretty fast.”

“Adjusting? No. I’m just here to supposedly relax before I have to start fighting in court again. This is all… not really my thing,” she says, surprising me with her honesty.

Oh, but it will be.

“What is it you’re needing to relax from?” I ask.

“Everything,” she admits, then deflects quickly. “But I guess you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Maybe more than you think.” This time when our eyes meet, there’s no looking away. She holds my gaze for a long moment before a server interrupts with plates of trout and roasted vegetables.

Dinner is delicious. It’s my favorite meal. The chef always prepares it perfectly. She’s about to take another bite when she glances down with a frown, her phone buzzing.

It keeps buzzing and buzzing on the table beside her wine glass, making the most obnoxious sound, and she stares at it like it might explode.

“Avoiding calls?” I ask, pushing a little to see what she’ll give up, both in conversation and character.

She stabs at her food, hesitating before answering. “Yeah,” she says, clipped. “Just... work. Always work.” But there's tension in her voice, the kind that means she's dodging something. Someone.

I wonder who thinks they’re important enough to bother her here.

Better not be *Stuart.* I may have to take care of that little problem.

“Well, you won’t have much reception out there despite what the website says,” I say with a grin, not thinking about how I can block reception to her phone. “Might as well turn it off.”

She bites her lip, and I imagine doing it for her, the thought sending heat through me. She doesn’t turn it off though. Just watches it until it finally goes silent.

“Sorry,” she says, forcing a smile that looks more real this time. “Not very good company tonight.”

“You’re perfect.” The words slip out too easy, but I don’t care if they scare her off—maybe I want them to.

It would save me a lot of trouble if she did just leave. But then I’d just hunt her down anyway.

She blinks at me, surprised by the bluntness. Her cheeks flush again and I want to reach across the table and feel their warmth under my fingers.

I change the subject before I do something stupid. “Come on one of my tours tomorrow. I’ll show you more of the trails.”

“Will other people be coming?”

I can’t tell if she wants them to, or if she doesn’t.

“They can.” I take another bite, chewing slowly. “If you want them too. It’s a first come, first served. Activities here are choices. If you want to participate you can, but you’re not obligated too.”

She nods. “Maybe I’ll do a group tour then.”

I try hide my disappointment. “Suit yourself.”

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YOU 'RE PERFECT

Decided I needed to get out of the cabin so I went for a hike and "ran" into Noah. Decided to have lunch date. He said 2 things that made me feel....Need? That sexual primal need that I have been missing? I dont know maybe I misunderstood or didnt hear it right. He said that he knows me better than I know my self. Also that I heard him barly above a whisper so not sure if it was there. Such a good girl. The praise, I need the praise.

GLAD YOU DID.

YOU HEARD JUST RIGHT. I KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU AND WILL PROVE IT SOON

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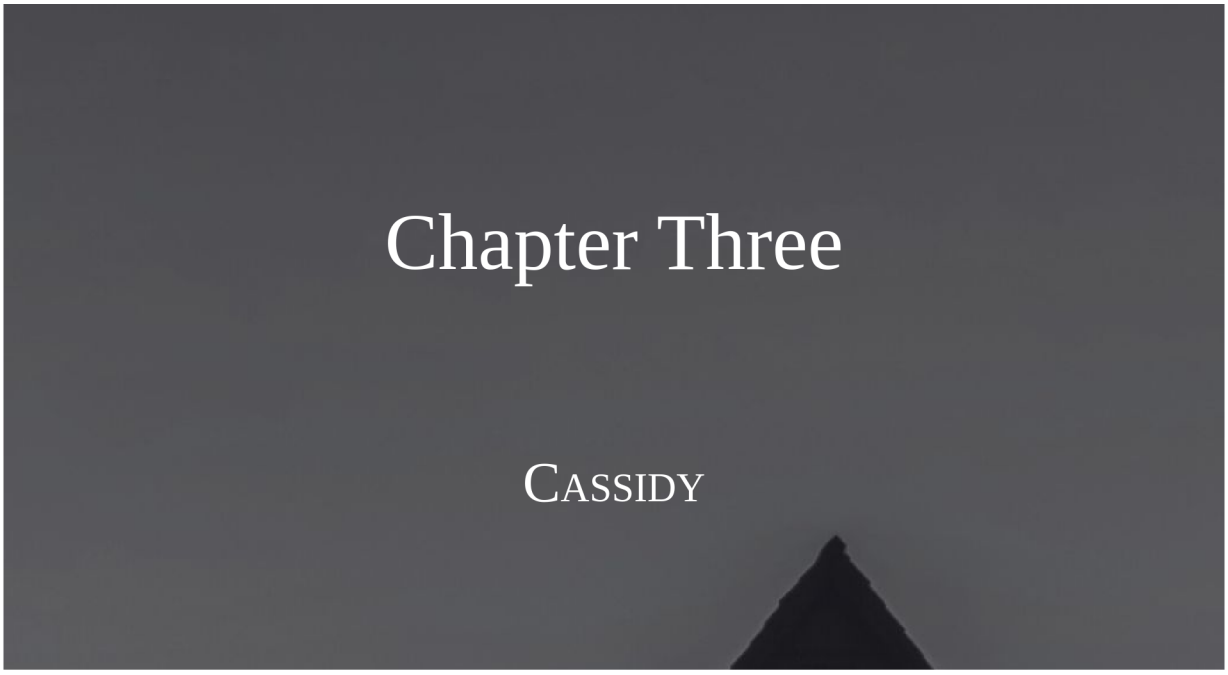

Chapter Three

CASSIDY

THE REST OF DINNER is quiet, and I retreat back to my cabin as soon as it's done. Noah is charming, but there's also something… intense in the way he says things. He seemed disappointed that I wanted to go on a group tour, but I also have this… feeling that I should stick to group activities for now. After all, I'm supposed to be relaxing, not developing a crush on my hiking guide.

I fell asleep on the couch after a cup of chamomile and only wake when the birds start chirping. Rubbing my eyes, I stood, stretching my body.

My bones hurt less being up here. Maybe it's the lack of stress. Or the fresh air.

Heading to the kitchen to turn on the coffee pot, I stop dead in my tracks.

A rose, bright red and beautiful, lay on the table. A prickle runs down my spine.

Someone is watching me.

And I think I know who.

Logically, I should run screaming for the hills. He was inside my cabin, probably watching me sleep. It's a gross breach of privacy. Not to mention fucking creepy as hell.

But part of me is flattered. That's the part that concerns me. That I like the attention.

God, what is wrong with me? This is fucked! He could be a serial killer!

And yet, I can't help imagining those dark brown eyes on me, seeing every single part I try to hide away.

The rose sits there, taunting. Too elegant for the rustic table. A message he knows I'll understand.

I pick it up and toss it in the trash before grabbing my phone and calling Monique. I pour a cup of coffee and start sipping while I wait.

She answers on the first ring. "Cass! Finally! I've been worried sick! You didn't return any of my calls last night. AND you've been ignoring my texts."

I wince at the concern in her voice. "Sorry. It was late and then I fell asleep. Besides, you told me to come here and relax. Can't do that if I'm on my phone 24/7."

"Well, don't do that again. I just want to know you're alive, you know? There's bears out there," she snaps, her tone softening with a sigh. "How's the wilderness experience treating you?"

My eyes drift back to the trash can where the rose sits and down the rest of my coffee in a couple gulps. "It's... intense."

"Intense? What happened?"

"Nothing," I lie too quickly, pouring myself another cup. "I just forgot how quiet it can be without the city noise."

She laughs, a sound like wind chimes over static. “Sounds like you're finally unwinding.”

“Yeah.” My voice doesn’t even convince me.

“Have you met any mountain men yet? Sweaty lumberjacks with rippling muscles?”

The image of Noah flashes through my mind, uninvited and all too vivid. “There might be one or two.”

She squeals like we’re back in college, sharing secrets over cheap wine and microwave popcorn.

“Well, enjoy it while you can. You need a rebound, girl,” she teases.

My laugh is weak, “Yeah. I guess.”

“Speaking of rebounding. Stuart is already flaunting that gaudy blonde he cheated on you with around the office. Don’t worry, I put ex-lax in her coffee for you.”

I gasp. “You did not! Moni, that’s a crime!”

“I don’t give a fuck. They both deserve to have the shits after what they did to you.”

“God, I love you. But be careful, alright? They’ll find a way to blame it on me.” I say, letting out a long breath.

“Don’t worry about it. How’s tomorrow for a call?”

“Promise you’ll answer this time?” She teases.

“Cross my heart.”

We hang up and my cabin feels too quiet, even with the river rushing somewhere in the distance. I look at the trash can again and wrestle with the urge to rescue the rose. Before I can think too much, I lace up my boots and head out towards the lodge. I don’t know what time the group hike is, or if

there’s a sign up, but either way, coffee is calling my name. One pot just isn’t enough.

My mind drifts back to the rose, how I’d been sleeping on the couch and didn’t even hear him come in. A flashback hits me of when I was back home, searching for my favorite black lace underwear and it was no where to be found. I’d opened my drawer, dumping all my under garments on the floor and a red rose had fallen out. At the time, I had brushed it off as Stuart. He was a little fucking weird like that, but now…

No. There’s no way Noah has actually been stalking me. That’s ridiculous.

But then there were also my diaries. Pages torn out, smudged ink. A flower petal jammed in between the pages.

Nope. It was Stuart. Fucking weirdo.

The trails are still damp from last night’s mist, and I breathe in deep as I jog up to the lodge. The air is cold enough to bite, waking me and chilling me to the bones. But I sort of like it. I never do this back home. Go for morning walks, I mean. It’s invigorating. Stifling a groan, I burst out in giggles.

Maybe I should start. Then I can turn into one of those social media influencer freaks who take selfies all the time and post about waterfalls and mountain climbs.

I walk inside, and heads turn as I sign up for Noah’s tour.

“Morning,” he says, appearing out of nowhere like he has some kind of sixth sense for me.

“Hi.” My voice is breathless from more than jogging.

“Glad you made it.”

“I said maybe,” I tease, “but here I am anyway.”

His eyes flash with something that looks an awful lot like triumph. “Just us today,” he says. “Guess no one else wanted an early start.”

The way he says it sounds a little too convenient. Maybe he scared them off or cancelled everyone else just to get me alone. That should terrify me—but it doesn't. Not in the way it should, anyway.

"Is that okay?" he asks, watching every reaction cross my face.

I stutter because words are hard when he looks at me like that—like nothing else exists but us. "Yeah, I just… we could always postpone it until later? See if more people sign up? I need coffee anyway."

"No worries, let's grab some coffee and something to eat and then we can head out." He completely ignores my suggestion, taking me by the arm and leading me inside.

His touch is firm and sends a jolt up my arm. I don't even think to pull away until we're already at the coffee station. He pours two steaming cups, one for him and one for me, adding just the right amount of cream without even asking.

"Sit," he says, gesturing to a table by the window where we can see the mist burning off the mountains.

I sit, because—let's be honest—I'm curious. About him, about this place, about why I can't get him out of my head since the moment I got here.

He leans back in his chair, completely casual, though there's nothing casual about the way he watches me. "You sleep okay?"

I nod, taking a cautious sip. "Like a rock."

"Good." His lips twitch.

"So, what's the plan for today? Are you going to work me to death on these trails?"

His laugh is low and does funny things to my insides. "Only if that's what you want."

I pretend to think about it, though my mind is already racing with all kinds of scenarios—some innocent, some less so. “How about you go easy on me at first?”

He considers this like it’s an actual negotiation and not just me trying to sound in control. “Alright,” he agrees, “but no promises.”

There’s something deliciously reckless in his voice and for a second, I forget why I’m supposed to be careful. I’m supposed to ‘heal’ from Stuart. Not jump pussy first onto another cock.

I glance around the empty lodge. “Where’s everyone else?”

He shrugs, taking a long drink. “Most guests sleep in, have lazy mornings and then do the easier trails in the afternoon. Guess I’m not much of a draw.”

Liar.

He’s the kind of man people flock to. They can’t help it. *I* can’t help it.

“Lucky me, then,” I say before I can stop myself.

His eyes find mine, and he sets his cup down slowly, deliberately. “I’d say.”

Heat floods my cheeks, and I look away, trying to find something else to focus on. Anything but him and that look. The view outside catches me off guard. Mist curling away from the peaks, leaving them stark against a brightening sky.

“Ready?” His voice breaks through my thoughts, startling me with its closeness.

“Sure.” The word is breathy and ridiculous.

He grabs a couple of bagels on the way out, wrapping them carefully and putting them in his pack before heading out. I follow him outside where the air is sharp and invigorating. He sets a brisk pace up one of the narrower trails called ‘Blue Moon Ridge’. It leads away from the lodge, and I

suddenly regret not going to the gym. My legs are burning already. He glances back to check on me every so often, an amused smile playing at his lips when he sees I'm keeping up better than he expected.

We don't talk much at first; a few comments about the trail conditions, some pointed observations about my stamina that make me push harder just to prove him wrong, but mostly it's a steady rhythm of footsteps and breathing. The silence should be awkward but instead it feels like a dare.

Eventually he slows enough to walk beside me, close enough that our arms brush occasionally.

"So, city girl knows how to handle herself out here after all," he says, half teasing, half serious.

"I surprise myself sometimes," I say, trying to ignore how every little touch sends a jolt through me.

"As you should." He stops abruptly, and I almost run into him.

We're in a small clearing, the trees forming a natural circle that feels strangely intimate. There's a boulder off to one side, and he gestures for me to sit as he pulls the bagels from his pack. I can tell why this place is the Blue Moon trail. If I come out here at night, I'd have the perfect line of sight straight up into the sky.

"Breakfast?" he offers, sitting so close our knees touch.

I take the bagel, watching him as I chew. "So, what's your story?" I finally ask. "The mysterious guide who cancels tours just to get me alone."

He smiles like I've given him a compliment, but he doesn't deny my thinly veiled accusation. "Not much of a story. Just prefer to keep things simple."

"And simple means…?"

"Being out here. Away from everything else."

There’s something unspoken in his words. There’s something he doesn’t want me to know, but I don’t press.

“You said you came to relax” he says after a moment. “To get away and unwind?”

“Something like that,” I admit.

“Bad breakup? Let me guess, he cheated on you.” He’s fishing now; I can tell he already knows.

“Wow. You’re even more perceptive than I thought.”

“I notice things.” His voice is even, but his eyes are intense.

I swallow hard, the bagel forgotten in my hand. “Yeah, well… I didn’t think he’d move on so damn fast.”

“It doesn’t take long for some people.” There’s an edge to his words that wasn’t there before.

“No,” I agree. “It doesn’t.”

He looks at me like he understands more than I’m saying. It makes me feel seen and heard, but an undercurrent runs through me.

This feels so intimate. *Too* intimate.

He leans forward, capturing my chin in his hand, rubbing his thumb over my lips. “Stuart was an idiot, Cass. You are beauty personified. I would never do you dirty like that.”

How did he…

And then his lips were on mine.

I should pull away, shove him off, demand answers—because how the hell does he know Stuart’s name? But I don’t do any of that. Instead, I kiss him back like this is the most natural thing in the world.

This… this… *stranger.*

He pulls me closer, his grip tightening. It's possessive and wild and everything I didn't know I needed. My head spins, and the only thing keeping me stable is him—his hands, his mouth, the way he kisses me like he's claiming me.

When he finally releases me, I'm breathless and shaken in ways I can't explain. He looks at me with a certainty that makes my denial crumble. How long has he been watching me? Knowing me?

"Cassidy," he says, my name rolls off his tongue with a rasp.

I stand abruptly, needing distance from whatever just happened. "I should __"

He catches my wrist before I can move away. "Stay." It's not a question.

"I need some air."

"We're in the middle of the forest."

"Alone," I clarify, but it sounds weak even to my ears.

He doesn't let go. Instead, he pulls me back down beside him with a force that should terrify me but doesn't. "You didn't come here to be alone," he says, his voice steady and sure.

"How do you know?"

His smile is maddeningly confident. "Like you said—I'm perceptive."

Did I say that? I want to argue, tell him he doesn't know a damn thing about why I'm here or what I need—but the words won't come.

Why did I come here? The question rolls around, and I can't find an answer I'm happy with.

I'm confused. My head is spinning, and I don't know which way is up and which way is down.

"I… I think I need to head back to my cabin. I'm suddenly feeling very tired." I say. My alarm bells are going off, loudly. There's something about

this that’s just… *wrong*.

And yet, he feels so damn *right*.

He stands, pulling me with him. “I’ll walk you back.”

“That’s not necessary.” My voice is a shell of my usual confidence.

“Humor me.” It’s a command disguised as concern.

We head down the trail, and this time the silence is awkward. He keeps pace beside me, an inescapable presence despite my attempts at distance. I wonder if I should be afraid. If I should pack my bags and leave while I still can.

But there’s a pull, stronger than logic or fear, that keeps my feet moving alongside his.

The lodge comes into view, and I let out a breath. He stops at the edge of the clearing, giving me space to walk ahead, but there’s no mistaking that he’ll follow wherever I go.

“I’ll see you around,” he says, and it sounds like a promise and a threat all wrapped into one.

I don’t respond as I make a beeline for my cabin. It feels like he’s still watching me, even after I shut the door behind me and lean against it for support. The quiet inside is deafening. Too much space for my thoughts to run wild.

Trying to piece it all together, I start thinking. What do I really know about Noah? A hiking guide who knows my name—and Stuart's—before being introduced. An outdoorsman who cancels tours just to be near me.

The rose.

Obsessive? Possibly. Terrifying? Maybe.

Intoxicating? Definitely.

I sink onto the couch, my mind racing through flashes of his eyes on mine. His lips were so soft… his pace… demanding. He's everything Stuart was not and I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing.

The dizzying uncertainty pierces through me, unsettling and electrifying all at once. My phone buzzes, and it just grates on my nerves. I press end, forcing the call to voicemail. Once it's done and the little icon shows up, I listen to the message.

"Cassidy?" Even through voicemail, Stuart's voice drips with that insincere earnestness I know too well. "I know you said not to call, but we need to talk. It's important."

I delete the message without a second thought, but his intrusion leaves me feeling exposed. Like he's breached my sanctuary from miles away. If he can just fuck off and stop being in my space constantly… sighing, I shake my head. He's a partner at the firm. There *is* no escaping him. I walk to the window, peering out into the forest. It's still. Too still.

In a moment of impulsive defiance, I grab a jacket and head back outside. The cold air is a slap across my face as I make my way to the lodge. *I need a damn drink*. Maybe Stuart's right—maybe I do need to talk—but not with him.

Probably with a therapist, if I'm being honest.

The lodge is quiet. Only a few guests are milling about, coffee cups in hand as they excitedly chatter about river rafting later in the afternoon. I make coffee in the communal kitchen and wait for it to percolate. A splash of cream later and I'm heading back to the dining area.

I take my mug to the wide windows overlooking the valley. My reflection in the glass looks like a stranger: tense shoulders and worried eyes. Someone I hardly recognize.

Lost in thought, I don’t hear him until he’s behind me.

“So much for alone time,” Noah says, his voice low and amused.

I spin around too quickly, and it makes me dizzy, “Oh lord. Noah. You’ve got to stop creeping up on me.” My heart is racing and for a second, I think he can hear it.

“It’s hard to miss the most beautiful woman in this place.”

I fight the blush creeping over my cheeks. “It’s only been a day, Noah. This is… it’s a bit much.”

There. I said it.

“Is it? I feel like I’ve known you my whole life.”

His words hit me hard. I want to scoff, roll my eyes, tell him to back the hell off—but I can't. I believe him. Part of me is caught in his web. Helpless. Hopeful. Scared.

“That’s not possible, Noah. You can’t possibly feel that way about me yet,” I finally say, but it sounds uncertain. Weak.

“And yet you’re here and you don’t know why.” He leans against the window frame, casual but impossibly present.

I take a sip of coffee, letting the bitter heat center me. “You know what? I think you’re used to getting exactly what you want.”

He grins, and it’s feral. “Only when I want it this badly.”

There’s a magnetism in his gaze that should repel me but doesn’t. Instead, it lures me closer, even as every rational part of my brain screams to walk away before I’m in too deep.

“You still haven’t told me how you know so much about me,” I challenge, setting my mug down. My fingers twitch with the need to touch him again.

He steps forward, closing the space between us like he owns it. Owns me. “What if I told you there’s nothing I don’t know?”

It’s an admission and a claim. My heart skips despite the warning bells clanging in my head.

“Then I’d say you’re either crazy or...” The word stalker hangs heavy between us.

“Or?” His voice is soft but insistent, urging me to finish the thought.

I look away, because I can’t do this. Not here, not with him staring at me like he can see straight through to everything I’m not ready to face.

“I… I can’t do this. I’m sorry. I don’t want this kind of attention, okay? Just… let me have the next 5 days of my retreat and then we can part ways and never see each other again.”

His eyes go cold as he stares at me. “Is that what you really want, Cassidy?”

I gulp. “Yes.”

He nods and turns, walking away.

Okay… that was weird, but… he’s going to leave me alone now… right?

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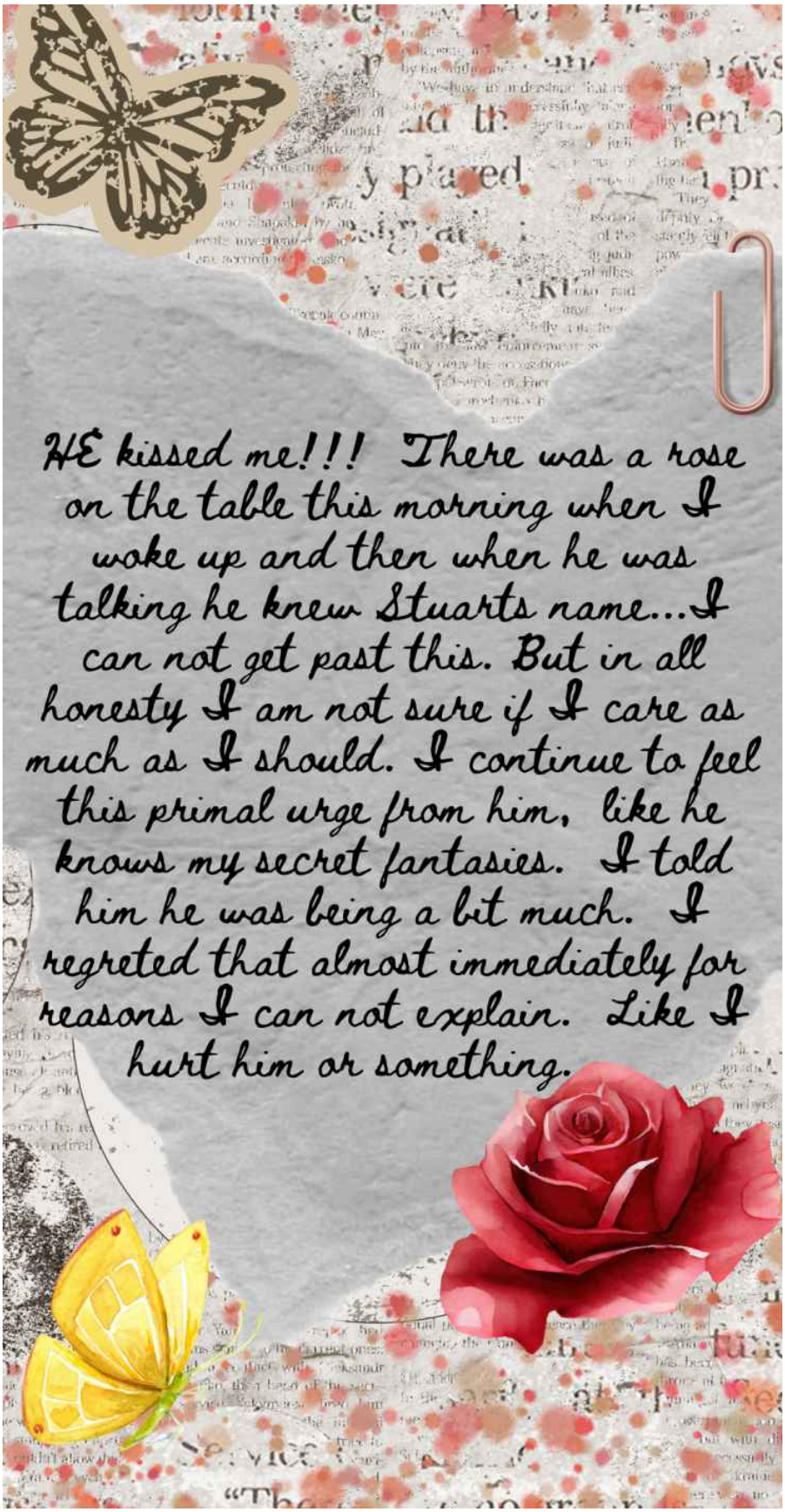
HE kissed me!!! There was a rose on the table this morning when I woke up and then when he was talking he knew Stuarts name...I can not get past this. But in all honesty I am not sure if I care as much as I should. I continue to feel this primal urge from him, like he knows my secret fantasies. I told him he was being a bit much. I regreted that almost immediately for reasons I can not explain. Like I hurt him or something.

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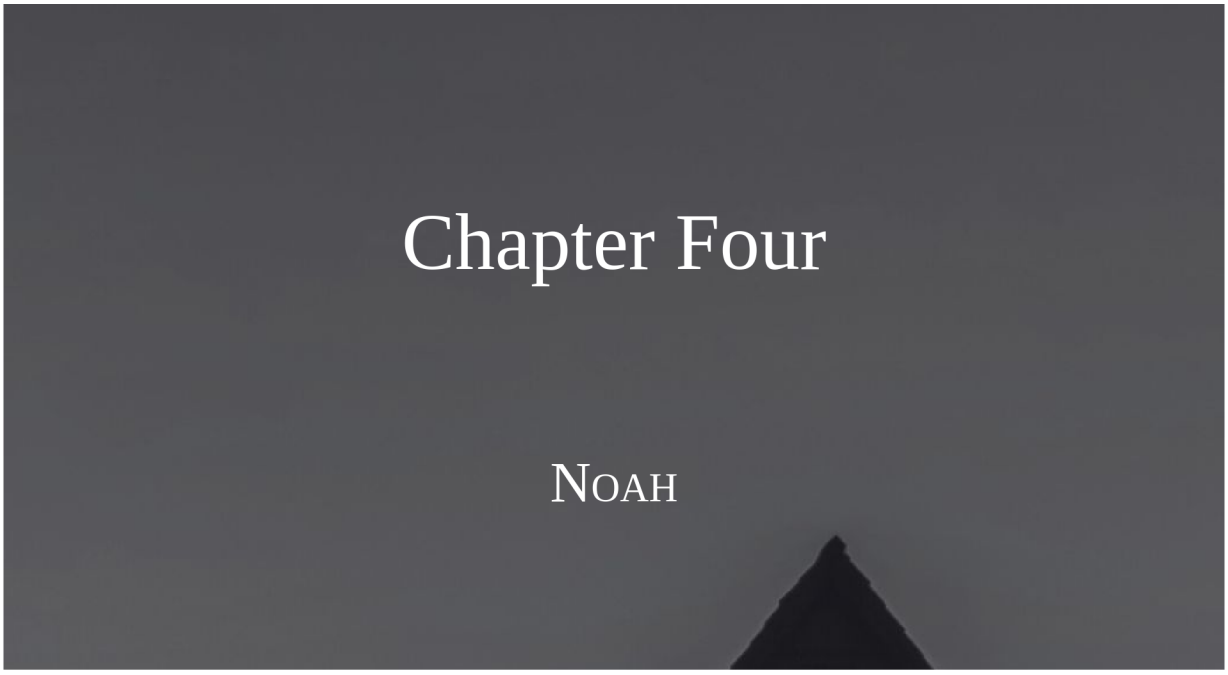

Chapter Four

Noah

I DON’T KNOW WHO the fuck she thinks she is, but there’s no chance in hell that request will be honored.

She is *mine*. And she will submit to me, one way or the other.

I head to my cabin, unlocking the door and stepping inside. My work phone buzzes.

Dana.

Releasing a huff of irritation, I silence the damn thing and throw it on the table before heading to my office. Opening the door, I’m greeted with photos of Cassidy. My eyes roam them all before settling on my new favorite one.

Her just getting out of the shower.

Naked.

Dripping wet.

I want her.

I want her so badly it’s burning inside my veins. There has to be a way to help speed this process of denial. More roses would be cliché. Her diary

said she likes big gestures, feeling wanted, cherished.

Big gestures… I finally settle on my plan. Sitting at my chair, I turn on my computer, and the password screen blinks at me. As soon as I type it in, *his* face is staring back at me from my earlier searches. I track his movements with no real purpose other than to ensure he's staying in his lane.

Stuart.

Maybe if I take care of the problem, she will loosen up. That should be a big enough gift. One she will never forget. One she will treasure.

Obsession grips me as I tunnel into his life, dissecting his life with a fine-tooth comb. I've been over all of this before, but this time, I have a purpose. Socials. Emails. Work calendar. *Busy guy.* I know where he is every goddamn minute of the day, and with his address in my hands, I grin. I can make sure he's never busy again.

A dirt nap, if you will.

The images on the walls surround me like a shrine, feeding the fire that Cassidy's rejection has lit inside me. She doesn't know what she needs—who she needs—and it infuriates me that she's playing so hard to get. While I do enjoy some struggle, some resistance, she should be putty in my hands by now. Though, to be fair, it's been a year of watching her and she's only had two days to come around. She *does* need time, but the time she gets will be spent with me in her space. Every moment of her time will be consumed by me. Clicking over to my security cameras, I switch to the feed in her room.

She's laying on the bed, a book in her hand, her legs open as her other hand disappears inside her pants.

Naughty girl reading those books again.

It’s almost too much to watch, knowing that her cheeks are flushed, and her breath is heavy as she plays with that perfect pussy. I flick the audio on, hear her breathy moans, and nearly lose my mind.

Five days? She’ll be begging for me by tomorrow judging by the display on my screen.

Her eyes flutter shut as she puts her book down, pushing her pants down to her knees to get better access. I lean back, unzipping my jeans and pulling my cock out.

It’s already leaking precum.

I stroke it slowly, matching her rhythm as she writhes on the bed.

The sound of her moans fills the cabin, driving me closer to madness. She doesn't know she's doing this for me. I’ve watched her like this a hundred times. One day she will do it right in front of me. I’ll tell her how I’ve jerked off to her more times than I can count. She’ll finally know, and she’ll love it.

I close my eyes, and it’s like I’m there with her—on top of her, inside her. She cries my name, and I freeze when I hear it, but her hand keeps moving quickly before stilling, her legs starting to tremble as she grabs her breast, pulling on her nipple.

“Fuck,” I groan, pumping faster as I imagine tearing those pants off her completely. My release crashes through me, spilling over my hand as I watch her pull her pants up, a smile on her face.

She said my name. She’s masturbating to me.

Grabbing some tissues, I wipe my come off my skin and smile. Such a perfect princess. Soon, it’ll be me between those legs, her thighs clenched around my face as she fucks into my mouth.

I shut the computer down and lean back, closing my eyes. Fantasies of her fill my mind. *Debating with herself before finally giving in. Those blue eyes, wide in surrender*. Pulled to me by the same force she's trying to deny. Time seems so inconsequential when I know just how badly I need her. I'll need to move faster if I want to tame the urges rising inside me.

She *must* be mine before I snap.

The thought of her giving in to her desire for me calms my nerves, but a sudden knock at the door shatters the peace.

"Noah?" Dana's voice is clipped, strained. Annoying as hell.

I open the door, and she stands there, arms crossed, and brow arched like she owns the place. "You've been dodging my calls."

"I've been busy."

"Busy stalking our new guest?"

My look shuts her up for now. "You know nothing, Dana."

She scoffs but follows me inside anyway. "We'll see how long this one lasts before you scare her away."

"It's different with Cassidy." Saying her name steadies me again. It annoys me that Dana had put the pieces together with Alannah, but I kept her around because she kept her trap shut and did her work. She was also a semi-decent fuck for when my hand just wasn't cutting it.

Though, to be fair, I stopped sticking my cock in her the minute I found Cassidy, so I can see why she is pissy.

"Right. Don't think I don't notice the way you watch her." Dana snaps. She's jealous. Angry. She's not the object of my obsession and she knows it. I don't really give a fuck. She knows better than to say anything. A woman disappeared around these parts a couple of years back and I'd have no problems making sure she does too.

“Did you need something else?” I ask, barely hiding my impatience.

“Yes. A group wants to go for a hike and Mike is injured.”

“Too bad. I’m going into town today. Got some business to take care of.” I say, leaning against the wall.

“Seriously?” She huffs, like I don’t own the fucking place and need to answer to her.

The words rip from me before I can stop them. "I’m not your fucking employee, Dana. My hours are my own. I don’t owe you a damn thing."

She studies me, her eyes narrowing. “What’s in town?”

I grin, enjoying her discomfort. “The usual.”

She rolls her eyes and storms out, leaving me alone with Cassidy's image burned into my brain. I glance at the pictures through my open door again, then grab a small bag from the corner. My mind races with possibilities as I head out to the truck.

The drive down the mountain is a blur. The road twists through dense forest, my thoughts twisted around one thing. One person. Stuart's address flashes in my mind. He’ll be the last fucking obstacle between me and her. The sacrifice needed to show her how much I love her.

I hit town and pull into a gas station, checking the address one more time. It’s close—closer than I expected. Checking my watch, I smile to myself. Back by nightfall if I play this right.

Slipping back into the truck, I let my mind wander to Cassidy again. Her soft whimpers. Her legs spread wide, waiting for me to fill them.

Stuart has no idea what’s coming for him. He deserves this death, if for nothing else but being a pathetic, spineless excuse of a man and taking the bait. He failed the test and took that blonde to his house when he could have said no and gone home to the most beautiful woman alive.

But he didn’t. Because he’s weak. It’s irrelevant that I had picked out exactly his type. She only cost me a few hundred and a Vera Wang dress to agree to my plan. She’s still with him, so she’s welcome for the introduction, I guess.

I roll past the restaurant he’s currently in and park far enough away that no one will notice me watching. Taking out my phone, I scroll to his schedule —corporate dinner, 8 PM—and decide to wait him out.

There's a bar across the street, and I slip inside for a drink to pass the time. Buzzed suits chatter around me, oblivious to everything except their sad little money-hungry lives.

I almost feel sorry for them. Almost. They don’t know what life is like outside of this cesspool. Probably never seen the sun rise over the mountain with the ocean crashing below, little bits of sea foam spraying you in the face. The moment of pity passes when I remember who’s waiting for me, what I’m going back to. She is saveable.

I nurse my drink, watching the minutes tick by until I see him. Wearing some cheap imitation suit that’s baggy in the shoulders. He looks pale, weathered, his sandy hair greasy and slicked back. It’s as if he stopped giving a fuck the way his face is blotchy, and his beard is growing in uneven patterns. Yet there he is, swagger in his step. Walking out of the building like he doesn’t have a fucking care in the world. He’s alone, checking his watch before pulling out his phone. A cab pulls up to the curb, and he slides in with all the confidence of a man who doesn’t know his life is about to change.

I throw some coins on the bar table and head to my truck.

The cab heads uptown, and I hang back just far enough to stay invisible. Traffic’s heavy, but it works to my advantage. Stuart’s not going anywhere

fast. My mind drifts back to Cassidy with each stoplight, fueling the fire inside me.

Finally, the cab stops in front of an apartment complex. Must be his girlfriends. I park across the street, paying the parking meter a quarter, watching him go inside before slipping on a hat and heading after him.

He heads straight to the bar on the first floor and the tall, leggy blonde greets him like the sun shines out his ass. I had picked her because she's pretty enough. Long blonde hair that falls in perfect waves with bright green eyes. Curvy with big tits. Dresses like she comes from money, but I know she doesn't. She was desperate when I approached her about trying to seduce Stuart, after having just lost her job as a receptionist in one of my father's companies.

She had run her fingers across my chest, thinking I was spoiling her because I wanted to take her out. It had been a struggle to contain my utter repulsion at being touched by her, but I'd smiled and offered her money and the dress. She was disappointed, but did what she was supposed to. *Clearly.*

I wait until they're well into their second round before approaching the bar, keeping an ear on their conversation without drawing attention to myself.

Stuart's laugh carries across the room, grating on my nerves with every damn word.

"…she was crazy," he's telling her, shaking his head like it's all one big joke.

Anger surges through me, but I keep my head, settling into a booth across from them, listening to them making fun of my girl. The waitress comes by, and I order another drink, biding my time. From what I've researched, he never stays the night at her place. He always goes home. That's when I'll nab him and play with him a bit.

After all, it’s the least he deserves after cheating on a dime with a piece of trash that’s only with him because she can’t afford rent without his weekly allowance to her. If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was more of a sugar baby arrangement than a relationship, but I don’t care enough to dwell any longer on their status.

I just want to watch Stuart bleed.

The two of them finally leave the bar, and I follow at a safe distance. She stops at the elevator and whines, asking him to come up while he shakes his head *no*. He kisses her goodbye before heading out the lobby door, as fucking smug as ever, before turning toward home. His building is only a couple of blocks from here. A ten-minute walk on a good day. But today isn’t a good day. For him.

His hands are in his pockets, and he skips across the street like a damn fool.

I wait until he’s a block ahead before stepping out of the shadows. He’s finally in front of his building, buzzing himself in and I slip inside. Up the elevator, left, right and then there it is. Apartment 24C.

He's just opening his door when he hears me. Turns around, confused. “Who the fuck are you? What the hell—”

He doesn’t get to finish. My fist connects with his jaw, and he staggers back against the wall.

“What’d you think was gonna happen?” I snarl. “After what you did?”

“I didn’t—” He chokes on it as I drive him inside, slamming his back against the hallway mirror.

“Thought you were safe? Thought you wouldn’t pay for hurting her?” My hand finds my pocket and I flick out my butterfly knife, licking down the blade before pointing it at him. “Cassidy. Or did you forget her name already?”

His eyes widen, fear finally sinking in. “You’re insane!”

I laugh at that, pushing him through to the living room, kicking the door shut behind me, closing my knife and pocketing it. “Maybe.” The place is neat, like a show apartment. Completely empty of anything real or personal. Scanning the room, I notice something. In the corner, on a side table beside the couch is a small photo of Cassidy. Walking closer, I see what the subject matter is and fury rolls through me. He shouldn’t have this. She’s naked, spread out on a bed, smiling up at the camera. Next to it is a bottle of lotion and a box of tissues. Like some weird pervert’s masturbation centerpiece.

My hands ball into fists and I head straight for him before sucker punching him in his perfectly punchable face. A crunch underneath my hand and his nose is bleeding, dripping down his ugly suit and onto the floor.

Fuck this prick.

He tries to bolt but he’s slow as fuck. I wrestle him down to the floor. The carpet muffles most of his struggles, but not all—the bastard manages to get out one single scream before I gag him with his own damn tie.

“You’re gonna wish you never met her,” I hiss into his ear, and I grab him, wrenching him onto his stomach, grabbing his wrists and pinning him there. He thrashes, trying to get me off, but he’s got no strength. Reaching into my pocket, I grab the zip ties I have. The moment his left hand is tied to his right, the fight goes out of him. Slamming his head on the floor, I get off his back and stand.

My feet are heavy as I drag him to the bathroom, pushing and pulling him until he’s in the tub. “Comfortable?” I ask, grabbing my knife again from my back pocket. His eyes go wide again, and he shakes his head furiously.

I crouch low, the tip of the blade glinting between us. “You know how long it will take to undo the damage you caused her?” I ask, voice low and

dangerous. “Weeks. Time I don’t want to spend cleaning up another mans mess, but I will. Do you know why?”

He shakes his head vigorously.

“Because she’s worth the trouble.”

His breath comes in ragged bursts through his nose as he struggles to speak around the gag.

“All because you couldn’t handle a woman like Cassidy. So, you fucking broke her instead.”

He’s whimpering now, shaking uncontrollably as I draw my blade along the edge of his cheek.

“Please…” he manages when I pull out the gag for a second.

Blood wells up, spilling down his face and soaking into his starched collar.

“Please,” he tries again.

I pause before shoving the tie back into his mouth.

Suddenly, I have a better idea. Reaching down, I unzip his pants and wrestle them off, his putrid cock laying flaccid against his bladder.

“Wow. Tiny dick too. I have no idea how you’ve managed to bag yet another woman with that thing, but you’ll never touch it to the thought of my girl ever again.”

His face loses all color as I trail the knife gently over the tip and back down. Then I push down. The sound of his muffled scream is beautiful. I start sawing, hacking at his pathetic little manhood. It disgusts me that I have to touch it to get this done, but it’s such a small sacrifice in the grand scheme of things.

Blood pools dark and wide around him, and I pull back like an artist finishing his masterpiece. His eyes are glassy now, the pain sinking him into shock. Once he finally passes out, I clean myself as best I can. If he

ever wakes up, I want him to have a little memory of me, besides his missing cock of course. Walking away and leaving him tied in the tub, I find some paper and a pen, writing him a love note before tucking the pen into my pocket as a memento. I head back into the bathroom and push the note into his pocket: "She’s mine."

I highly doubt he will ever see it. If, by some miracle, he finds the will to survive being a dickless, spineless freak, it will take weeks to heal physically. *If* that happens, he's never going to mentally recover from this.

And if he ever does, I'll know.

But chances are slim judging from the steady stream of blood spurting from his body. He groans and the sound makes me smile. What a lovely way to end an otherwise irritating day.

I grab a towel and wrap my gift inside it, admiring how it shrunk almost into a ball and then I shove it in my pants pocket. *She’s going to love this*.

Before heading out, I wash my hands again and take off my blood-stained shirt, putting it in the oven and turning it on. I grab a plain white t-shirt from his drawers and slide it over my head, making sure to wipe my prints as I touch things. Not that it’ll matter. With any luck the place will burn down before the neighbors call the fire department.

I head towards the front door before pausing. That photo taunts me. Before I know it, I’m grabbing it and shoving it into my pocket. She’s *mine*. The thought of him touching his cock to her is enough to make me want to go back into the bathroom and finish the job, but I don’t. I’m kind enough to let nature take its course. If he’s meant to live, he will.

And then he will be in constant fear of my return and quite frankly that sends a ripple of excitement through me.

As I slip out the door, I hear the faint crackle of fire as the oven catches my shirt before closing it behind me. With any luck I'll see an obituary in a few days.

The thought fuels me as I make my way to the elevator, down to the lobby and out into the night. The streets are slick from rain. All around, people rush past with umbrellas and hoods pulled up, not noticing me at all. Like every time I come into the city. No one ever stops here for a friendly hello.

I'm halfway back to my truck when my phone buzzes with a security alert. She's back in her room, on the phone. Mild irritation courses through me. I'm out here, taking care of her problems, and instead of relaxing, she's working.

That's okay. I will teach her how to enjoy life the simple way.

Three hours later, I'm pulling up to Pine Ridge in my truck. It's well past midnight, but there's still a faint glow from the main lodge windows. Her cabin is dark, just as expected. She thinks she needs time away from everything. From everyone.

From me.

But she doesn't need to be alone, and she doesn't need to rest and relax. She needs a permanent life change. I park by my cabin and take my gift with me, tucked neatly inside its towel.

As I slip into the trees, it starts to rain again—a gentle patter that turns into a steady downpour by the time I've reached the edge of her clearing. Her cabin is quiet, and I struggle not to let myself in and take what I want from her.

I will soon. If she doesn't relent.

I duck onto her porch and leave my surprise wrapped on the doorstep before retreating into shadows.

She’ll find it in the morning.

A giddy feeling travels up my spine.

I hope she likes it.

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DON'T WORRY BABY YOUR DREAMS WILL BE COMING TRUE MUCH SOONER THAN YOU THINK.

I touched myself while reading my one hander book about a masked stalker. He finally gave in and kidnapped the girl and took her away and made her see she loved him when she would all along. The forcefulness that the MMC took the MFC was so hot I needed to touch myself. I thought of Noah and the [illegible] me so much wetter and hotter. I came almost instantly yelling Noah's name. It was the best Orgasm I have ever had. I am not going to last the 5 days at this rate.

AND IT WAS THE BEST ONE I HAVE EVER HEARD OR SEEN BEFORE. I CAN NOT WAIT UNTIL I AM BALLS DEEP IN THAT WET CUNT THAT IS ALL MINE. YOU WILL HAVE NONSTOP ORGASMS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.

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Chapter Five

CASSIDY

THE SUN STREAMS INTO my window, accompanied by the faint chirping of birds. I shiver as the air hits my skin, the blankets falling down as I sat upright.

Coffee. Need coffee.

Searching the cupboards, it's to my utter disappointment that I've already ran out of coffee for the pot and have to head to the main lodge to get some refills. Grabbing an apple off the fruit basket, I head back into the room to change and bundle up for the walk. A nice, thick navy-blue sweater overtop of a turtle neck with some sweats, knee high socks and my biking boots.

Good enough.

Checking my phone, I'm surprised not to see a million messages from Stuart. Normally he is already blowing up my email, or if I am especially unlucky that day, he calls me.

It is a nice change. Taking a deep breath, I release the anxiety sitting in my chest. With a spring in my step, I fling open the front door, only to stop dead in my tracks at the balled-up towel on the porch.

What the hell is this?

Bending down, I grab it and unravel the gift, my mouth dropping open at the shriveled, dark, crusty ball inside.

Is that a…

No…

Nope.

Not a dick.

Definitely not a dick.

Looking down again, shock hits me as I drop the package, the penis hitting the deck with a tiny thud. *Holy fuck, there's a goddamn dick on my porch.*

What in the Kentucky fried fuck is this? Whose dick is on my porch?

The apple slips from my other hand, rolling across the deck as I manage to stumble back into the cabin. My mind races, jumping from one conclusion to the next without finding an answer. I slam the door behind me, breathing hard, the pounding of my heart drowning out any rational thought.

This is insane.

My head is floating, leaving my body in shock, levitating somewhere in the nether, my limbs trembling like I've just run a marathon. Who leaves a severed dick on someone's doorstep? A sick fuck, that's who. But why?

I pace the room, trying to piece it all together. I didn't have enemies. No one *hated* me per se. I didn't hate anyone either. Well… except one person, but I didn't despise him. More or less hated him because he cheated on me.

My ass finds the couch as I slump into the cushions. Noah's face flashes through my mind. *Is it him? Could he? Would he?*

No. That's insane people talk. He would never…

I don't know why, but fear isn't entirely what I'm feeling. There's a twisted heat beneath the panic, bubbling up unexpectedly.

And then there's something else—an undeniable curiosity. Stuart hasn't called or emailed. And this little package has shown up on my porch.

Out of pure morbid fascination, I head back outside and sit on the step. A breeze blows and I almost scream as something flies by me. The little cock has rolled down the step and is only a foot away from where I sat. I stare at it again, unable to look away. If it *is* his, I don't remember it being that small. Is that a by product of being cut off? Or was it just always so… pathetic?

It can't be.

But maybe…

The sound of footsteps falling hard over the twigs and leaves interrupts my train of thought.

"Cassidy?" *His* voice.

Noah.

I look up, my heart jumping into my throat. He's there, in a beige sweatshirt and hiking pants, looking like he's just rolled out of a wilderness catalogue. His dark eyes meet mine, and I swear I see them flicker towards the gift.

"Oh," I stammer. "Hey—uh—"

"Everything okay?" he asks, feigning the perfect amount of concern.

I stand so quickly I'm dizzy. "Why wouldn't it be?"

He nods to the dick on the ground between us, acting as if we're discussing the weather and not a severed body part. "Interesting morning delivery."

I swallow hard, trying to keep my composure. Doubt fills my mind. He was acting as if he wasn't the one who did it… maybe he wasn't?

"Did you see who left it?" There's an edge to his voice that I hadn't heard before.

I shake my head. "Found it out here. Wrapped in a towel."

My brain is on overdrive. It's him. It has to be him. Who else would do something like this? Who else would have the audacity, the balls—literally —to—

And yet, why am I not terrified?

"I can help you find out," Noah says quietly, his presence overwhelming but strangely calm.

"What?" My own thoughts drown out his words before they reach me.

"I'll keep an eye out." He looks at me pointedly. "Make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Think someone will keep leaving me severed dicks to wake up to?" I challenge, watching him carefully.

"Not if people know what's good for them and act right." He says it so confidently, that somehow, I feel safe.

"What do you mean by that?"

He steps closer, kicking the dick under the porch. "I mean exactly what I said, Cass. If people act right, things like this wouldn't happen. Whoever it was attached to must have been a really bad guy for this to happen."

I frown, trying to find the words. "It's a very specific message."

Noah grabs my hand and hauls me to my feet, pulling my body flush with his chest. "Maybe someone wanted to make sure you're left alone out here. So, you can figure your shit out."

"Or maybe someone has a twisted sense of humor," I shoot back, watching his reaction.

His lips curve up slightly. "You could say that."

"So…" My voice falters, and I hesitate. "You really don't know who did this?"

He shakes his head slowly. "What if I did?"

The question shocks me because I don’t know what would happen if he admits it’s him.

We both fall silent, the sound of morning rain dripping off the trees filling the space between us. It’s comforting and unsettling at the same time, especially while he holds me like this. Intimate. Close.

“What are you going to do?” he asks, breaking the quiet.

“Try not to lose my mind?” I suggest, shrugging. “Maybe get coffee? Pretty sure I need it after all this.”

“I’ll walk you to the lodge,” he says, more a statement than an offer.

I think about refusing but don’t. There’s no point pretending I have anything under control right now – including myself.

“Okay.” The word slips out before I can stop it.

As we move down the path through the trees, I can’t help glancing sideways at him. He walks with a quiet confidence, so sure of himself, so sure of everything.

I realize with a start that if I had really cared about Stuart, I would have tried calling him to make sure it wasn’t his.

But I didn’t and I don’t. Mainly because I’m pretty fucking sure it is his and I don’t care enough to find out if the rest of him survived. And of course, because my luck is so spectacular, it rains. Feels like all this place does is piss all over me, constantly.

And I’m not into golden showers.

I *think*. Never tried one to say for sure, but it sounds like something I’d avoid.

“So…” I say, looking over at him as the rain slowly soaks into his hair. He’s so effortlessly sexy, just brushing his hair back as if the rain doesn’t bother him.

“So.”

“What’s for breakfast this morning?”

“Whatever you like. Chef did a buffet,” he says. “More of a brunch by now.”

We reach the lodge as he holds the door open for me, letting the warmth and smell of fresh coffee wrap around us. I catch a glimpse of myself in the reflection of a window—wild-eyed and disheveled, not at all like the composed lawyer I’m supposed to be.

“Cassidy!” Dana calls from behind the counter, waving a cloth like it’s going to fly out of her hand. “You okay? You look… different.”

I force a smile, nodding. “Just an interesting start to the day.”

She eyes Noah behind me but doesn’t say anything more, just gestures to the steaming pot on the counter. “Coffee’s fresh.”

I fill a cup with trembling hands, feeling Noah’s presence at my back as he steps closer.

“I’ll make sure you’re not bothered again,” he says quietly, his breath warm against my ear. “By *anyone.*”

I shiver despite myself, clutching the cup tight. “You seem pretty dead set on keeping me from the world.”

“I am,” he replies, and his hand brushes my lower back as we move to sit by the window overlooking the misty woods.

Dana watches us with a frown on her face, but Noah just fixes her with a hard stare, and she looks away.

As we sit down, I try to push aside the chaos in my mind. Whoever left that package wanted to shake me up. And maybe they did. But there’s something else growing beneath it all—a stubborn thrill that refuses to let me go.

If it *was* Noah… maybe I was okay with that. I had always dated schmucks. But this… this intensity was appealing.

Someone who would deliver me the heads of those who wronged me.

Or dicks.

Noah's eyes lock onto mine across the table and his lips upturned in a small smile. He slides the buffet checklist across to me and we spend a moment just filling them out.

"Tiny dick for your thoughts?"

I choke out a laugh, almost spilling coffee on myself.

"You're not easily disturbed."

"Would it make you happy if I was?"

His smile widens. "Not really."

"I'm just thinking about what I want to do today. I was looking at rafting, but honestly, I'm not a fan of water. Well, fast moving water. So, maybe some rock climbing? I saw in the flyer that there's a mountain nearby perfect for beginners." I wave over the waitress and give her my buffet list.

Noah eyes me, considering. "And perfect for getting lost," he says finally, handing the waitress his own list. "But I can take you."

I raise an eyebrow. "You sure you don't have better things to do than babysit?"

"Never said it was babysitting." His voice lowers along with his gaze as it skims over my outfit, appreciation in his eyes. "Besides, I'd rather be with you."

He's always so intense. I look away, focusing on the rain-soaked trees outside. Part of me wants to push back, to draw some line in the sand I can pretend still exists between us. But another part—the one winning right

now—is more curious about the man that I suspect delivered me the severed cock of my cheating bastard ex-fiancé.

“So, you’re just going to follow me around until... what?” I ask lightly, as if I'm not dying to hear his answer.

“Until you know you’re safe.” There’s an unspoken promise in his words.

The waitress returns with a basket of fresh pastries and steaming plates of eggs, bacon and a bowl of French Onion Soup, my favorite. I reach for a croissant, feeling like the rest of the world has faded into a distant hum and it's just us here in this strange bubble.

“Who says I’m not safe?”

He takes a forkful of eggs and shovels them in his mouth before chewing thoughtfully. “I just have a hunch that you get yourself into trouble. Particularly with men.”

I smirk, tearing my croissant into pieces. “And how would you know that?”

“Just a hunch.”

“Okay, so let’s say for the rest of my time here, you follow me around, keep me safe from the unknown disasters waiting to befall me. What happens after I go home?”

His eyes darken and panic clenches in my gut at the way he looks at me.

“And after that?” I press.

He hesitates, trying to find the words he wants to say. “We’ll see.”

“Seems like you’ve got my life all planned out,” I say, trying to sound casual as I tear into the pastry.

“I’m good at planning,” he replies, eating another forkful of eggs.

I bite into my croissant, savoring the momentary distraction of warm butter and flakes melting on my tongue. “And here I thought you were more the spontaneous type.”

“I’m flexible,” he says, his gaze never leaving mine. “But when I want something…”

I swallow, a mix of excitement and anxiety building. He’s not hiding it—not his interest, not his intentions. And where I should feel trapped, scared even, there’s this insane part of me that leans in instead of pulling away.

“Then plan to take me rock climbing,” I say, more breathless than I mean to be.

He grins, a flash of satisfaction in his eyes. “You’re the boss.”

The rain outside switches from drizzle to downpour as we finish breakfast. It’s too loud and too sudden to be anything but ominous. But even as it pounds against the windows, even with Dana casting worried glances our way, there’s a giddy recklessness in me that just won’t quit.

“You ready?” Noah asks, standing and stretching like we didn’t just eat half of the lodge’s food. All this delicious cooking is going to hit my hips and I’m grateful that I can work it off with a hike.

“Yep.”

We head back into the rain, my coffee-fueled nerves buzzing beneath my skin. Noah falls into step beside me like he belongs there, like he always has.

“What if I change my mind?” I ask as we walk towards the gear shed.

“About climbing?”

“About all of it.” I don’t mention the dick, because I don’t think it needs to be said. But the possibility is there. I could turn him in. If I wanted to.

His expression doesn’t waver as he gathers the supplies for climbing. “You won’t.”

I’m not sure which one of us he’s trying to convince.

The path is slick beneath our feet as we climb the trail, almost too slippery to keep going. The rain is torrential and I'm yelling at Noah that we have to turn back.

He grabs my hand, forcing me to keep pace with him as he points up ahead. "There's a cabin just up here. We can rest there until it stops."

I follow him, the thrill of running through the storm fueling me. I should be freezing, miserable, but instead I'm breathless with excitement. The cabin appears suddenly, a shadow in the downpour. Noah throws open the door and pulls me inside.

We're soaked, dripping puddles on the wooden floor. He shakes his head like a wet dog, sending water everywhere, and I can't help but laugh.

"Some plan," I say, peeling off my sweater and squeezing it out.

"Spontaneous enough for you?" he replies, grinning as he strips his own sweater off.

The cabin is small and sparse. Nothing like the glamorous one I've been using, with only a rough-hewn table, a three-seater sofa, a nice fireplace and a bedroom and bathroom down a short hall. But it's dry, and some reckless part of me wonders if he planned this too—being forced to share a space with him.

I shiver involuntarily from the cold, and he quickly lights a fire in the old fireplace, flames crackling to life under his practiced hands.

"Warmer?" he asks, an unfamiliar softness in his voice.

I nod, rubbing my arms as heat begins to fill the room. "Not what I expected for our first date." My voice is teasing, but he takes my words seriously.

He steps closer, close enough that I feel his warmth and the intensity of his attention even without touching. "Oh, so this was a date?" He cracks a

smile and my stomach flips. “Well in that case… something tells me you’re not one for ordinary dates.”

I meet his eyes, trying to read all the unspoken things there. “And you are?”

His lips twitch into another smile—a little darker this time. “Not even close.”

He trails his hand down my cheek, between the valley of my breasts before ending at the hem of my sweater, sliding it over my head before grabbing my shirt. I let him lift it, pulling it over my head and tossing it to the side. The air is cold on my skin, but his fingers are fire as they trace along my collarbone, down my arms. I didn’t put a bra on this morning and my nipples are hard points, ones he traces with reverence, forcing heat to pool between my legs.

“How's this for forcing you to warm up to me?” he murmurs.

I swat at him playfully, though my heart stutters beneath his touch. “Pretty bold strategy.”

“It’s worked so far.” His hands slide down to my waist, wrapping around me and pulling me against him. I don’t resist. “You don’t seem to be stopping me.”

We’re standing there, soaked and half-naked, and it’s like we’re the only ones in the world. The storm is raging outside, but it only fuels the heat inside—inside this cabin, inside us.

He leans in, his lips brushing mine. It’s a soft contact at first, tentative as if he’s giving me a chance to pull back. But I don’t. I press into him instead, the thrill of giving in spurring me on.

The kiss deepens and his grip tightens. I'm melting into him when something shifts—a sudden awareness of the storm's intensity or maybe just the wildness of what I'm doing—and I draw back slightly, breathless.

“We… we shouldn’t. This is wrong,” I say, a crawling sensation creeping into my gut. “I… I can’t have a relationship. I’m going back to the city soon.”

His eyes search mine, hunger and desire that sends another jolt through me. “Maybe it’s time you changed your goals, Cassidy.”

“What? Noah. That’s ridiculous. I can’t change my entire life because of a retreat fling.”

“FLING? You think what this is, is a FLING?” Rage pulses from him as he yells, making me flinch. I haven’t seen him lose his cool, even once, but this scares me.

“Noah—” I start, but he’s already pacing, the storm outside nothing compared to the one brewing in here.

“I’ve made it pretty damn clear how I feel,” his voice is low and dangerous now. “I thought you were starting to see it.”

“I am, but—”

He stops and faces me, eyes burning with something fierce and all-consuming. “What do you think happens next?”

“I finish the retreat and go home. To my office. My practice. That was always the plan,” I remind him, not sure if I’m pleading or demanding.

His jaw tightens. “I’m not going to let you walk away like none of this meant anything.”

I gape at him, torn between anger and something more confusing. This should be everything I don’t want, everything I should run from. Instead, my head is spinning. *What the fuck is happening right now*?

“We can’t just pretend like this is... a relationship,” I say weakly.

He moves closer again, and something in my chest twists at the intensity in his expression. “No, Cassidy. I’m not pretending anymore. This isn’t just a

relationship. This is forever.”

The finality in his voice hits me hard. It’s like he’s giving me an ultimatum without saying another word.

“I need time to think,” I say sharply, stepping back and grabbing my damp sweater off the floor, not bothering with the shirt. The air’s too thick, too charged with emotion I’m not ready for.

Something flashes in his eyes—a mix of pain and frustration—but he doesn’t stop me when I turn for the door. The rain is deafening as I burst outside, soaking me immediately.

He lets me go.

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I am 99.9% positive Stuart's dick was on my porch this morning. More than likely since I haven't heard anything from him today, I kind of think he might be dead. I am not sure I should write this down. Maybe I need to write it down and burn it. Catharsis. I will figure it out later. I'm not sure I ever loved him. I'm not upset about this. This is a whole new thought to process.

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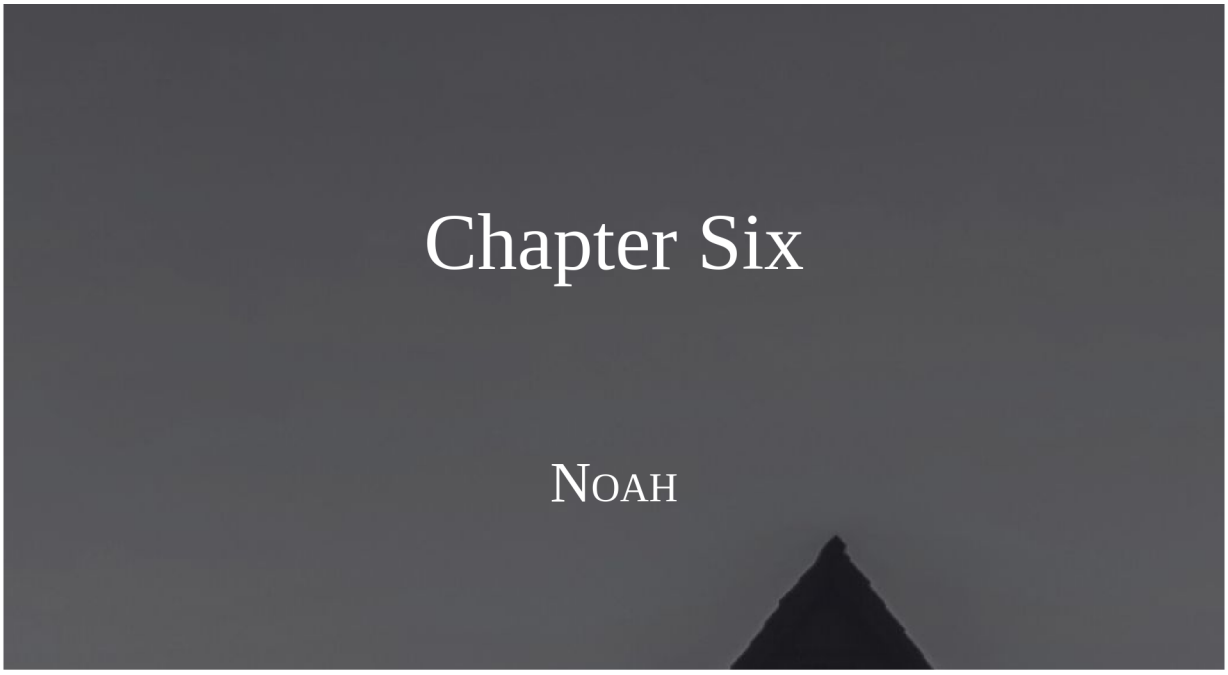

Chapter Six

Noah

I SLAM MY FIST into the log wall. Anger burns through my veins.

I tried. I tried *so fucking hard* to do this the slow way. The ‘right’ way. Slowly warm her up, be the gentleman. I gave her the dick of her enemy. What the fuck else could this infuriating woman want?

She walks into the rain and slips, the mud already moving in slow rolls as the storm continues.

If she wants to play hard to get, I can play hard to get.

Heading into my room, I rummage through the drawer, grabbing my phone. The one I had especially outfitted for the boonies. Yes, this was my cabin. Or rather one of my cabins. This particular one was shared with my cousin and his deranged friends. They have part ownership over this specific cabin because it has something special built underneath it. I’ve never used the extra amenities, but from what I hear in the group chat, they enjoy getting their jollies off down there.

Everyone around here thinks I’m just a hiking guide. They don’t realize I actually own Pine Ridge Wilderness Resort and the 400 acres surrounding

it. I come from old money and when my asshole father kicked the bucket, I used my inheritance to finish building this place. It's taken me half a decade to get it to what it is now. I started small. One cabin, then two and built it out as my allowance grew. I finished the main lodge last year, three months after he was in the ground.

The final fuck you to a man who always hated that I didn't want to take over his shitty businesses. In the end, he ensured I was the CEO for all of them, and I just handed the reigns to whoever he had in charge of the places. Hands off boss, I guess.

He never understood why I wanted to live out here, so far from the city, but I had my reasons.

Partially to try convince people how much better life is when you aren't running the rat race.

And partially to find *the one.*

I punch in my cousin's number and wait for him to answer. "Kairo, I'm using the cabin for an indeterminate amount of time. Don't bring anyone here."

He sighs, "Noah, man, I had a girl I was trailing."

"Don't give a fuck. I found the *one.* Stay the fuck away or I'll kill you."

"Yeah, fine, whatever man. Just try not kill this one. Cleaning up the last one fucking sucked. The bears were all over the hills for months."

I hang up before I say something I'll regret. Kairo is not one to talk when it comes to bodies. He left a trail of men all over from the various women he thought he loved. He toys with them, killing their partners in the hunting cabin and then tires of their grief, disappearing from their lives without a care in the world.

We were nothing alike, even though we shared a family tree. I look outside and try wipe that idiot from my mind. The storm outside rages—nature's fury matching my own. How could she not see how much this meant? How much I've put into finding her, guiding her here, making her mine.

Did she really think that Monique just 'happened' across my retreat? No. I put the retreat flier in her inboxes, slowly using various methods of psychology to prompt her to show Cassidy. I knew Cass would never go for this on her own, but her friend convincing her it was a great idea? Perfection. It also helped that I sent a promo to Monique: book a friend and get a free stay. Of course, the fine print says the stay can't be used at the same time.

Didn't need a third wheel coming along.

The truth is, I waited for her for an entire year and my patience ran out. Slowly implanting subconscious cues for her, for her friends. All pointing to a get away from her busy life. I am a patient man, but that ran out when she got here and kept texting her stupid fucking ex.

I should have killed him the minute I watched him fuck her doggy style while on the phone scrolling porn. No one makes my girl feel less than.

Pacing the cabin, my restless energy surges with each step. This is exactly why I couldn't do things the conventional way. Cassidy needed to be pushed. She needed me just as much as I needed her; she was just stubborn. Clinging to the new age wave of 'women should be independent'. Sure. They absolutely should. But it doesn't hurt to have a man do the dirty work, and that man was me.

A flash of paranoia spikes through me. I expected she'd be back by now with the rain still pounding the ground, but again, that stubborn streak refused to allow her to turn back. *What if she tries to leave?* Anger shifts to

urgency and I reach for my pack, already forming a plan. No way she's getting out of these mountains without me. Not in this rain.

I throw on a dry jacket and boots. Looks like we're doing this the hard way.

I pause before heading out and return to my room, opening the closet and pulling out my mask.

A black, full cover mask with plastic hearts over the eyes. It was simple, compared to the ridiculous demon ones my cousin had custom made for his merry band of deranged idiots.

But I like it.

Slipping it on, I catch my reflection in the window. *Perfect*.

The rain slaps like needle pricks against my face as soon as I'm out the door. It's a wall of gray and white, drowning out sound and sight, but I know these woods better than anyone. I follow the path back toward the main lodge, the relentless downpour barely slowing me down.

Cassidy wanted time to think? Fine. She could do it while I was there to remind her exactly who she belonged with.

The trail is slick, treacherous, and there's no way she's gone far. Searching for signs that she had slipped, I checked the tracks. Broken branches, boot steps, and a long slide before an indentation of hands from where she got back up.

This is where I want Cassidy. Stumbling. Desperate. And alone.

I move quickly, adrenaline pushing me over wet earth and stone. The rain and wind howl, but the corners of my vision are sharp with focus. Soon enough, I spot her—half-drowned and trembling, struggling through the storm with that stubborn fucking grace of hers.

She's beautiful.

I slow my approach, letting the anticipation build, each step bringing me closer to what's mine. She doesn't see me yet. Not until I want her to.

My pulse beats in time with the rain as I break through the trees, closing the distance between us in seconds. Her head snaps up and she freezes, eyes wide and wild.

"Cassidy," I say, calm and commanding under the mask. "You're coming with me."

Fear flashes in her eyes but so does desire. She hesitates, just for a moment, before turning to run.

I let her think she can get away.

Her frantic dash is no match for me in these woods; I'm on her in moments, close enough to hear her ragged breaths mixing with the storm. Close enough to see the panic set in when she realizes there's nowhere to hide out here.

She stumbles again, and that's when I strike—sweeping her off her feet into my arms before she hits the ground.

She fights against me, fierce and desperate like something cornered. But it only makes my hold on her tighten.

"Let go!" she yells over the roar of the rain, kicking hard enough that one of her boots hits my shin and a groan escapes me.

"Cassidy. That's enough. Stop acting like a child."

"Leave me alone!" She starts screaming at the top of her lungs, so I clamp a hand over her mouth to stifle the screams.

"Keep screaming and I'll shove my cock down your throat."

She eyes me before sucking in a deep lungful of air and screaming again.

"Suit yourself." I dump her on the ground, in the mud and the puddles and set my pack down, grabbing the rope. She tries to get up, tries to scramble

away but slips.

Grabbing her, I haul her to a tree, tying the rope around her body, securing her to the trunk. Unzipping my pants, my aching cock springs free.

Finally… finally she stops screaming, her eye's wide as she stares at it.

I stare at those rosy lips and imagine her mouth wrapped around me, sucking me in, swallowing my come. "You're mine, Cassidy. There's no running. I tried this the nice guy way, but you… you are stubborn. So now, you get to experience the other side of the coin." I fist my cock and walk closer to her, running it along her cheek.

She glares up at me with defiance, rain streaming down her face. "You're insane," she spits, writhing against the rope.

"I'm exactly what you need." I move closer, my body pressing against hers, the rain a cold reminder of how alive she is in my arms. "Funny though, that a kiss sends you into a spiral and not the intuition that I served you your ex's cock this morning."

She opens her mouth to scream again but I shove in before she can. Her teeth lightly graze me, and it sends a jolt of need through my entire body. She freezes, eyes locked on mine, and I can't help the low groan that escapes as she trembles around me.

I pull back, and she gasps for air. "Do it," I say, my voice raw and thick with everything I feel for her. "Scream all you want."

She doesn't this time. I can see her face as she debates whether or not to clamp down on my dick with her teeth. "Bite my cock and I'll shove it in your ass. Take your pick Cassidy."

Her silence is more powerful than her struggle. It's surrender and it's defiance all at once, and it lights every dark corner inside me with need

having her like this. My hand moves to her hair, gently but firmly holding her still as I thrust deeper into her mouth.

She's never looked more perfect. Sopping wet, eyes red, lips swollen. The perfect picture.

I tighten my grip on her hair as I rock my hips in slow but relentless rhythm. Her eyes flash with something that looks like anger... or fear... or maybe even understanding. Whatever it is only makes the heat between us rise until it’s almost unbearable.

“Suck.” I command, slamming my cock to the back of her throat, making her sputter and gag.

She chokes, tears mixing with the rain on her cheeks. She hates me but she loves me, and she doesn’t know which side she wants to win. It doesn’t matter. She will come around to it all. She is my obsession, my possession, my only desire. I groan, feeling her give in, every part of her going soft as she sucks me in.

It’s overwhelming, the sight of her taking it all, the feel of her trapped against me. I’m dizzy with it, the build up crashing like wildfire through my veins. “That’s it,” I rasp, barely recognizing my own voice. “Just for me.”

Her breathing is ragged around my cock, and I pull out just long enough for her to gasp before thrusting back in. The sensation is too much, I’m too close, and I don’t want to give in yet. I want to keep fucking her perfect mouth as she chokes around it, but my balls tighten, apparently having a mind of their own.

With one last thrust, I lose myself in her completely. My vision whites out and I'm coming hard in that warm mouth. She jerks in surprise but doesn’t pull away, swallowing like I knew she would.

I stay there for a moment, panting, watching her as she catches her breath. My dick slides out of her mouth as she stares. Her eyes are still defiant but colored now with something softer. Confusion. Maybe curiosity.

My hand caresses her hair as I speak, voice calm and possessive. “See? You can’t escape this.” I loosen the knots slightly but keep her tied to the tree. The rain slows to a drizzle as if even the storm has spent itself.

She glares at me, chest heaving beneath her drenched clothes. “You think this changes anything?” Her voice is hoarse but steady.

I laugh softly, tucking myself back into my pants and leaning in to press a firm kiss on those swollen lips. “It changes everything, little minx.”

“Noah, please. Let me go. I won’t tell anyone. I’ll go back to the city. You can keep doing…” she looks around, “whatever this is. Please. This isn’t fun anymore. I was willing to overlook the dick thing because Stuart was an ass, but this is too far. I’m a human being, not a pet. Please, let me leave.”

LEAVE? “No. That’s not an option for you, I’m afraid.” I run my finger along her cheek, wiping the rain and tears that I’ve caused. "We’re just getting started."

Her eyes flicker with frustration, but there’s no mistaking the heat behind them. She shifts against the ropes, her struggle half-hearted now, testing rather than desperate.

“I’ll untie you when I'm sure you won't try to run again. Because if you run again, Cassidy, I will fuck you and I won’t be gentle. And I don’t want our first time to be such a brutal display of ownership. So, when you’re ready, I will let you go, and we will go back to my cabin. But ONLY when you’re ready to admit what you really want.”

“You think you know what I want?” Her voice holds a tremor, doubt creeping in at the edges.

“I’ve read those journals of yours,” I say, watching the shock ripple through her before she clutches at composure again. “Every. Single. Word.”

An entire arsenal of responses dies on her tongue, and for a moment, she just stares at me.

"You're sick," she finally mutters, but it lacks conviction.

I smile, brushing my thumb across her mouth. "I'll give you everything you've ever dreamed of.”

She turns her head away from my touch, defiance resurfacing even as she shivers with cold and something more. I lean back and take in the sight of her tied there, stubborn and exquisite in her refusal to give me the satisfaction of knowing how close to the edge she really is.

This push and pull between us, it feels right. And I know she feels it too, no matter how much she fights it.

I stand up slowly, making sure she sees every lingering look I give her before picking up my pack and grabbing a water bottle. “Want some?”

Her glare could cut glass, but there's a flicker of something else beneath it.

“Suit yourself,” I say with a shrug, taking a long drink while she watches. "I'll be back soon. Think about what I've said."

She struggles against the ropes again as I walk away, her voice cracking through the trees. “NOAH! You can’t leave me here! NOAH! This isn’t over!”

I pause, just enough to make sure she knows I've heard. “You’re right,” I call back. “It’s just beginning.”

The path back to the cabin is slick with rain and mud, but I barely notice. My mind is full of her—her mouth, her scent, the way her body finally softened under my touch like it was meant to all along. I reach the cabin

and shove open the door, shaking water from my hair as I drop my pack on the floor.

The place feels different now that she’s here, every corner of it filled with potential and anticipation. This is where she'll understand. Where she’ll realize what we have is unstoppable and where she’ll become even more beautiful once she does.

Once she submits, we will occupy one of the other cabins along my property. One I built, just for her. It’s got a line of sight of the waterfall and everything. But here… this is where I break her.

I’m already impatient for her to see it, but she needs time, especially after telling her I read those journals of hers. She was stupid for bringing them to the retreat. I’d only found one when I visited her in the city, but she brought six more. Did she really think I wouldn’t want to read them? She’s closer than she thinks to unraveling; I saw it in her eyes out there in the rain.

The fire is almost out, so I stoke it, adding some logs before setting my kettle on the grate to heat for some coffee. I know just how much she loves her caffeine. And depending how long she chooses to be obstinate; she will need it to heat herself.

I grab a couple of blankets and extra rope before heading back into the woods. The storm has left everything smelling fresh and earthy, and I breathe it in deeply as I move with purpose down the winding trail.

She comes into view, and I pause. She’s gorgeous, like a forest goddess, shivering but fierce, a wild creature cornered but undeniably alive. Her lips press in a thin line.

“I’ve been thinking.” She says.

“About?”

“About what I’m going to do when I get free,” she snaps, but her voice wavers.

I kneel beside her, enjoying the way her eyes flare. “And what’s that?”

Her silence is more telling than any answer. I wrap a blanket around her shoulders, watching how her body leans in unconsciously to the warmth. She swallows hard. “This is insane, Noah. You can’t keep me here.”

“I think you’ll find I can.” I cup her face, forcing our eyes to meet. “You’re afraid of how much you want this. How much you need it.”

“No—” Her denial cuts off as I close my mouth over hers, coaxing and relentless until she kisses back. The truth of it hangs between us when I pull away, leaving her breathless and visibly shaken.

I loosen the ropes bit by bit, reveling in each tremor that works its way through her as freedom inches closer. Finally, with one last knot undone, she’s untied fully but still doesn’t move.

I straighten up, extending my hand with quiet certainty. She stares at it like it might bite.

“Ready?” My question hangs like a dare in the air.

Her fingers twitch before reaching out to mine, and the moment they touch is electric. We stand together, and for an instant, everything around us falls away—the forest is the silent witness to what neither of us will say.

Without another word, we start back toward the cabin. She stays close behind me, steps steady but hesitant enough to betray her conflict. The rain has stopped entirely now, leaving only the soft drip of water from the trees and the muted sound of our footsteps.

I take her back to the cabin and open the door. Inside, the warmth rushes over us, and she regards the cabin with the same skepticism and fascination

as before. Her eyes rest on the fire, on the coffee kettle whistling low, then on me.

“You didn’t think I’d leave you out there for long, did you?” My voice is even, but I let a small edge of amusement slip through.

She hugs the blanket tighter around herself. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Good.” I pour her a cup of coffee, my movements deliberate, keeping her wondering. She watches as I set it down on the table next to her, steam curling into the air between us.

“It’s not poisoned.” I make a show of taking a sip from my own cup.

She hesitates just long enough to convince herself before reaching for it. Her hands are steady now; that old determination surfaces beneath her confusion. She takes a sip and closes her eyes briefly, savoring the heat. When she opens them again, there’s new resolve staring back at me.

“This doesn’t mean you’ve won,” she says, but it sounds more like a challenge than a threat.

I grin, knowing that if we’re keeping score, I’m miles ahead. “You’re still here.”

“You didn’t give me a choice.”

Silence stretches out as we drink our coffee, both of us keenly aware that this calm is temporary. Her gaze drifts over every corner of the cabin. The stacked logs by the fire, my gear lined neatly against one wall, before landing back on me.

“So, what now, Noah?” She sounds tired. Maybe I should get her in the shower and into bed.

“Now, we get to know each other and begin the first day of the rest of our lives.”

She shakes her head. “People back home will miss me. What then? What are you going to do when the retreat realizes I haven’t been back at the lodge in days.”

I let her words hang between us, letting her think they might rattle me. “You seem to think your practice misses you. I’ve been tracking their emails. They won’t notice for weeks.”

That hits, and I see it—the brief flash of doubt, of loneliness. She tries to mask it with a scowl, but I’m learning to read her, all those little expressions she doesn’t let anyone see.

“And the retreat?” she repeats. “Dana? Surely she will notice my absence.” Her voice rises, almost hopeful.

“Nah. I can take care of that. At least for a while. Long enough that you’ll be begging me to keep you here.”

Her jaw clenches as she looks away, but she doesn’t deny her curiosity. There’s more fight in her than I anticipated, which is good. More satisfying when I win.

I take the empty cup from her hand and pull her to her feet again. She stumbles slightly but catches herself, eyes locked on mine in defiance.

“What are you doing?” Her voice is shaky now, vulnerable.

I lead her to the bathroom, every step resounding with intention. “You’re drenched and freezing.” I turn on the shower, the stream building hot and steady behind the glass door. “Get cleaned up.”

She hesitates, looking from me to the shower and back again. "And if I don’t?"

“Then we both get in there until you do.”

A quick intake of breath tells me I’ve hit another nerve. Her anger flares bright for an instant before giving way beneath exhaustion. She pushes past

me into the room without a word, closing the door hard enough that it echoes through the cabin.

I smile as I hear water hitting tiles.

Each small surrender brings us closer to where she's meant to be—where she craves to be.

I'd even bought her favorite shampoos and conditioners. Home away from home. For now, at least. Heading to my room, I open my closet and step inside, tapping the wood until the secret door unlocks. Walking in, I sit at the small desk and look at the CCTV screens covering every inch of this place… and the forest around us.

She's just standing there, letting the water hit her skin. Finally, she reaches for the shampoo, staring at the bottle. Her body is flush, the difference in cold and hot causing her skin to redden.

But it's her hands I watch. She lathers the shampoo and runs it through her hair, allowing the water to carry the suds down the drain before she trails her fingers down her body, stopping at her nipple.

She cups her breast as if testing her own response, her eyes closing as she pushes hair back from her face. I lean forward, pulse quickening as the steam thickens around her. This is the real Cassidy, stripped of defenses, exploring new boundaries.

I can watch her for hours.

She looks around, as if expecting me to spring up out of no where, but I won't. I'm enjoying the show. My cock grows hard as her hand trails lower and lower, her leg parting as she runs her fingers through the slit in between her thighs. I can see exactly when her chest starts rising and falling rapidly, her fingers moving faster, with more determination.

My little minx liked being tied up and used.

Her mouth opens in a silent gasp, a shudder moving through her entire body. She slows for a moment, as if savoring the sensation, before rinsing off and shutting the water. I tear my eyes from the screen just as she wraps herself in a towel and leaves the bathroom.

I *knew* she'd feel it too.

Turning back to the monitors, I scan for signs of life outside. It's nothing but trees and rocks and miles upon miles of forest between us and anyone who'd come looking. Anyone who even cares enough to try. I watch long enough to be sure before heading back to the living room, timing my footsteps so that she hears me coming.

"Cassidy," I call softly.

"Not exactly five-star service," she says, deliberately looking past me toward the empty window where she must have expected bars. "Do you plan on feeding your prisoners? I'm also naked, so how about getting me some clothes."

"No to the clothes." I give her a look like it's obvious because it is. "But to the food… I'll make a sandwich."

She hesitates, dripping hair plastered against heated cheeks. The towel barely clings to her body, exposing just enough skin to remind me how thankful she should be that I have restraint. Unlike my monster of a cousin who would have ripped her in two by now. She holds it tight like it's armor before stepping around me and heading for the couch.

"How considerate," she says coolly, brushing past with an air of grudging dignity. "At least toss me a blanket. I'll freeze to death."

Lie. The fireplace has this place toasty, but I smile. "Sure." Grabbing a blanket, I throw it to her and she grabs it, pulling it over her body.

"I'll eat here when it's done," she says, pulling the blanket tighter.

“Suit yourself.” I head to the kitchen, unhurried. Let her act like a child if it makes her feel in control.

The fridge is full, stocked for weeks. I pull out turkey and cheese, slicing bread as I watch her from the corner of my eye. She sits tense, a warrior wrapped in terrycloth, but there’s a softness now, too, a vulnerability she can’t quite hide. My cock twitches at the memory of her in the shower, and I force myself to focus on the task at hand. No use rushing things when they’re going so well.

She doesn’t look up when I bring the plate over, setting it on the table beside her.

“Eat,” I say. “You won’t get far on an empty stomach.”

That catches her attention. “Get far?” Her voice is sharp but curious.

“If you want out so badly, you’ll need all your strength to make a run for it.” I grin at her, letting the idea sit there between us.

“Is that how this works?” She picks up the sandwich and takes a defiant bite. “You let me go just so you can track me down again?”

I keep smiling, enjoying this new spark in her eyes. “If that’s what you want.”

“What if I don’t want any part of this—” she gestures vaguely around the cabin “—game you’re playing?”

“You might surprise yourself.”

Her mouth tightens around another bite, but she doesn’t argue. The silence stretches, broken only by the crack and pop of the fire.

“Can you… go do something? It’s weird that you’re sitting here watching me eat.”

“Sure. I can find something to do.” I grab her ankles and push the blanket over her knees before she can protest, her mouth falling open, revealing bits

of sandwich. “Close your mouth when you eat, Cassidy.”

She sputters but I hardly hear it. All I hear is the roar of blood in my ears as I stare at her perfect, pink pussy. I widen her legs, even as she tries to clamp them shut, trailing my hand up her thigh and pushing a finger inside her. Curling it, I push it in and out, my thumb circling her clit.

Her whole-body jerks and I pull away before she can climax, leaving her stunned. My cock is hard, aching for more, but I stand, letting the moment settle in her mind like a seed.

“I’ll be outside.” I head toward the door, taking my time. “If you try to make a break for it, at least let me grab my jacket.”

I don’t wait for an answer. The cold hits me as I close the door behind me, and I take a deep breath of mountain air to cool the fire in my veins. She’s rattled, but not broken. This new defiance makes me want her more. My hand lifts, my fingers touching as they slide from her wetness before I put the finger that was inside her, into my mouth and taste her for the first time.

Fucking divine. I need to go, to walk, to clear my head before I force her to take my cock, force her to ride my face until she’s shaking.

I walk into the trees, each step crackling on crisp snow, the cabin disappearing from view. She’s on edge now, unsure of herself and what she wants. I give her space to stew in it while I gather myself. Soon, she will be begging to sit on my dick.

The woods close around me, calming my nerves. I know she won't make a run; not yet. She still thinks she’s outsmarting me by waiting for the perfect moment. It makes me grin to think how little she understands about being hunted.

After a while, I turn back toward the cabin. Through a gap in the trees, I catch sight of something that stops me: Cassidy standing in front of one of

the big windows, looking out with eyes like blue fire. Her hair spills wild over her shoulders, she's dropped the blanket, her perky tits on display, that ring of blanket around her feet almost making it look like she's floating.

I stay hidden, watching her watch for me. Even from here, I can see the flush on her cheeks and imagine fucking her face again.

When she feels she's safe from me, she dips her fingers between her legs.

Hmmm, twice in one day. Wonder who could have caused that? A wicked grin spreads over my face.

This time, she won't be coming unless it's on my face or on my cock. I step out from behind the tree and love the way her face pinches as her eyes narrow on my figure walking back up the path.

In an act of defiance, she lifts her leg, perching it on the windowsill, her thigh falling open as she pushes her fingers in and out of herself slowly.

I can't help it.

I break into a run.

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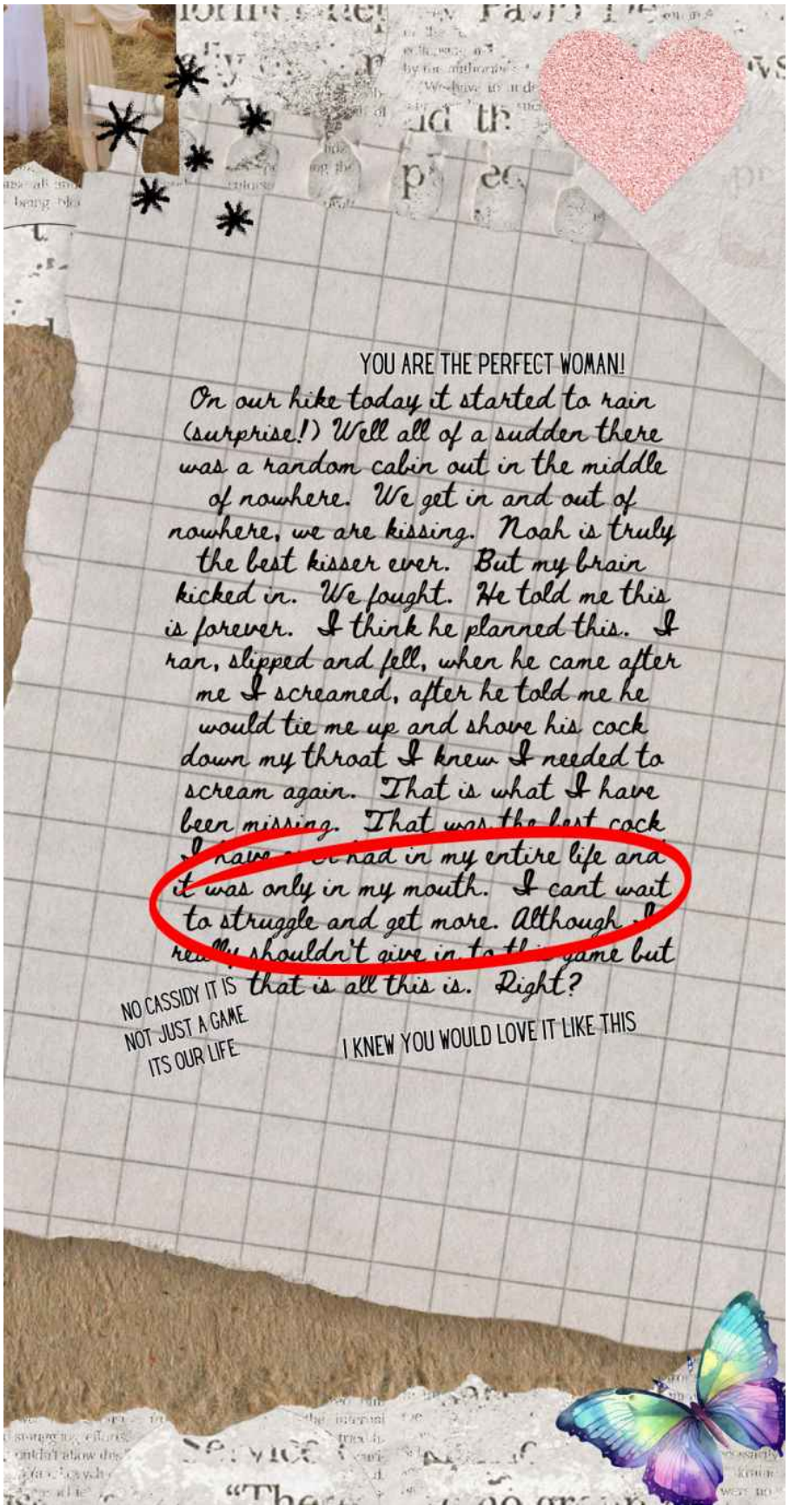
YOU ARE THE PERFECT WOMAN!
On our hike today it started to rain (surprise!) Well all of a sudden there was a random cabin out in the middle of nowhere. We get in and out of nowhere, we are kissing. Noah is truly the best kisser ever. But my brain kicked in. We fought. He told me this is forever. I think he planned this. I ran, slipped and fell, when he came after me I screamed, after he told me he would tie me up and shove his cock down my throat I knew I needed to scream again. That is what I have been missing. That was the best cock
it was only in my mouth. I cant wait to struggle and get more. Although
that is all this is. Right?
NO CASSIDY IT IS NOT JUST A GAME ITS OUR LIFE
I KNEW YOU WOULD LOVE IT LIKE THIS

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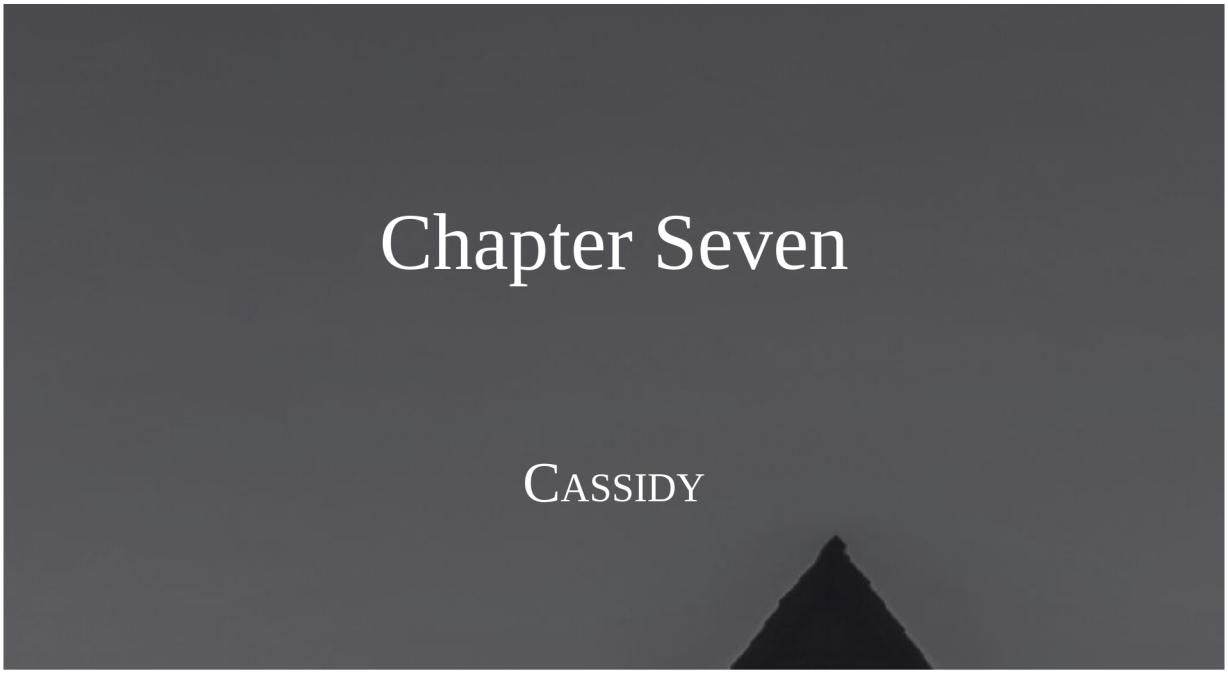


Chapter Seven

CASSIDY

I'M FURIOUS.

Seething, actually.

But still, my body betrays me. Arousal floods my system when I think about him peering down at me with that mask, shoving his cock in my mouth.

My pussy throbs with how he just opened my legs, teased me and walked off without finishing the job.

I need him to fuck me, to fuck me until this sin is out of my system and *then* I can find a way to escape him.

Just once.

I only need once.

So, I put myself on display, knowing he's out there somewhere, watching me. And it works. He slams open the front door with a bang and stalks towards me. I don't turn; I don't stop. I keep touching myself, watching as his figure gets closer and closer, looming behind me in the window.

Any second now, he'll grab me, force me to finish what I'm doing on his cock. Instead, he stops, hovering over me, so close I can feel the heat of him

on my back. My fingers don’t stop. They keep pumping and rubbing and teasing until—

Until his hand wraps around my wrist.

My breath catches as he pulls my hand away from myself, bringing it up to eye level. He’s not wearing the mask, but the look in his eyes is enough to warn me that this is dangerous territory. His grip tightens painfully around my wrist, and those lips of his pull back into a sneer.

“Who told you to touch yourself?”

Those words rumble out of him like thunder.

I yank at my wrist, trying to free myself. “If you’re going to do it, just do it,” I snap, hating how desperate I sound.

He jerks hard on my arm, flipping me around so my tits press up against his chest. “Is that an order?” His mouth is everywhere, my neck, my jaw, and that stupid neediness in me whines for him to go lower.

“Yes,” I hiss.

“Not good enough.” A single sharp movement sends me sprawling to the floor.

“Fuck you,” I spit.

He’s on top of me before the words even finish leaving my mouth, pinning both arms above my head with one hand. “Oh no,” he murmurs wickedly as his other hand moves between my legs again. “You don’t get to come until you beg.”

His fingers slide in, forcing a moan out of me despite wanting to stay silent. My pride fights against the urge to give him what he wants, but my body is a traitor, bucking against his touch with every slick stroke. I twist beneath him, trying to get free, but it only makes my need fiercer.

He lets out a low laugh, the sound vibrating through me like an electric current. “Stubborn girl.”

I thrash again, helpless against the pressure building inside me. “I’m not—”

The words dissolve into a gasp as he pushes deeper. My mind fractures between anger and lust, and I hate how much I want him to break me all the way.

“Say it,” he demands, his movements stopping just short of bringing me to orgasm.

My breathing is ragged now, each inhale a struggle against his weight and my own resistance. I bite down on my lip hard enough to taste blood. Maybe if I hold out a few seconds longer, I’ll—

But then his fingers press harder, coaxing fire under my skin, and the last of my resolve snaps.

“Please!” I hear myself cry out.

His hand stills again immediately.

I can feel him smiling against my cheek. “That’s better,” he says softly, almost sweetly.

For a moment that stretches unbearably long, he just stays there, making me stew in humiliation and unbearable want. Then slowly, infuriatingly slowly, he starts fingering me again. His thumb pushing against my clit as his fingers hit that spot.

“Yes,” I gasp as sensation takes over everything else.

“Yes?” He taunts with mock innocence. “Yes what?”

“Yes! Please! Let me come!” The words spill out of me before I can think twice.

He pauses, pulling his hand away and pushing my knees apart, settling between them. His dark eyes meet mine and the depths of his desire for me

steals my breath. His lips curl into a slow smile as he moves forward, his tongue grazing my clit.

The touch is feather-light, a promise and a threat, and suddenly I can't remember how to breathe. "Beg harder, Cassidy," he says, his voice vibrating against me, making every nerve draw tight.

His mouth inches closer, then pulls away again, my hips trying to follow, my hands falling through his hair as I try grab it.

"Please!" I gasp again, my pride gone, my body a desperate traitor. "I don't know what the fuck else to say. I need you to fuck me until I come."

Then his mouth is on me, hot and relentless. He's merciless, ramping the pressure until it's unbearable. The coil inside me snaps and I scream, my entire world narrowing to this single shattering instant.

It's too much and not enough and everything all at once. I'm dimly aware of his grip anchoring me as I tremble and come undone beneath him. Before I can ride out the last wave, his cock is slipping through my folds, pushing inside me.

I cry out again. He's big and thick and he is relentless, not giving me a moment to come down before he's thrusting in and out of me like a mad man.

Noah's voice is a low growl as he pistons in and out, tearing away the last shred of self-control. "Fuck, you feel good. So perfect."

He moves in deep, hard thrusts that won't let up. My body is ready to give up, but the throbbing is building again, every thought lost to the friction and heat. I arch against him, pulling him deeper, the way he pounds into me making everything inside unravel. I'm wrecked and trembling and needing more with every stroke.

Something breaks loose again. Another orgasm slams into me, making my legs shake as he fucks me through it. My muscles clamp tight around him, and he groans my name like it’s the only word he knows.

He doesn’t stop, not even as I shudder around him. He drives into me again and again, until I feel him stiffen, gasping against my neck as he comes with brutal force.

For a moment neither of us breathes. Then he's pulling out and collapsing beside me on the floor, both of us slick with sweat and need finally spent.

The room spins slowly back into focus. The enormity of it hits me in fragments: my shredded dignity, Noah’s hunger burning through his calm facade, the terrifying thrill of being completely possessed.

I should leave right now before this goes any further off the rails. Before he pulls me under for good.

But I can’t move. I can barely remember why I wanted to.

Noah’s hand brushes hair from my face, tucks it behind my ear with unexpected tenderness that makes me ache worse than anything that came before it.

“You’re thinking too much,” he says quietly.

“Maybe you’re not thinking enough.”

“I’m thinking just the right amount. You committed the cardinal sin, Cassidy. There’s no going back. You’re mine now. Body, mind and soul,” he murmurs against my collarbone, his voice smug with satisfaction.

The floor creaks as he shifts onto his side, one elbow propping his head while I struggle to regain composure. My heart still thunders like it's trying to escape this cabin and run into the forest where none of this can reach it.

His fingers brush a stray strand of hair from my face. “How do you feel?”

It’s tender. Intimate. If I’d have been here of my own volition, I would have

called it sweet.

But I wasn’t. And not even the mind-blowing sex we just had can make me forget that he basically kidnapped me. It almost did, but then I remember… I have nothing that’s *mine* here. It’s all just… him. It’s all-consuming.

He’s watching me, those dark brown eyes hooded but alert, like he's gauging if I'll bolt or surrender.

“I hate you,” I whisper.

He chuckles low in his throat. “I’ll take that as a ‘more than satisfied.’”

My mouth opens to fire back, but there’s no retort ready. Just this gnawing, infuriating awareness that he’s right. That somewhere in the depths of my twisted psyche, I wanted him to catch me. To force me down and fuck me. To claim me. I wanted all of this.

He stands, pulling me to me feet before scooping me up and carrying me to his bed. He lays me down with infinite gentleness before getting in behind me.

Noah pulls me closer, his warmth wrapping around me in an embrace I’m too exhausted to fight. The cabin walls creak softly, like even they’re settling into a resigned acceptance of what’s happened here.

“We should get some sleep,” he says, and when I don’t respond, he adds, “You’ll need the energy for tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. The word hangs between us like a question mark. What new line will we cross then?

“Why? What’s tomorrow?” I ask, silently chastising myself for my curiosity when *damn-it,* I want to hate him.

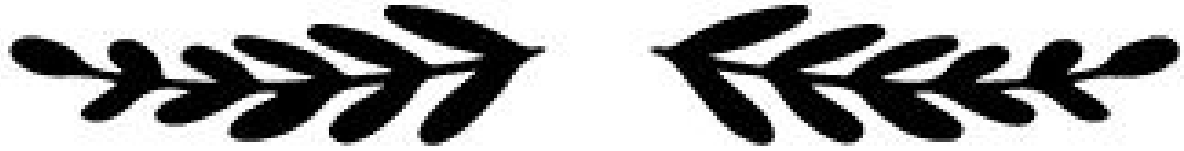
“That mountain climb I told you I’d take you on.”

“Ever the outdoorsman,” I say dryly, trying to muster some control with sarcasm since everything else has failed.

He smiles against my skin, smug certainty radiating from every pore. “And you’re my favorite adventure.”

I wish I didn’t feel the thrill ignite at his words. Wish I could deny that a part of me—the part I've been running from—wants to let him drag me deeper into his wild obsession. I’m trying so hard to push him away, to make him leave me be, when the reality is, I feel safe, even when logically I shouldn’t.

Exhaustion wins and my eyes drift shut, heart still pounding out its wild rhythm as he kisses my back.



It’s the clamor of wildlife chirping outside that wakes me, the sun barely brushing the horizon through fogged cabin windows. Noah's already up, rummaging through gear with efficiency born of too many mornings like this one.

I sit up slowly, muscles protesting after yesterday's chaos on the trail and last night's...everything. He looks over, a wolfish grin on his face.

“Made you coffee, sunshine, you ready to go?”

I look at him like he has three heads. “The fuck? No, Noah, I’m not ready to go, unless by ready to go you mean back to the lodge where I can eat some real food, sleep in a real bed, and then go home to my real house.”

“We both know you're not going anywhere.” He says it like a statement of fact, no malice, just unshakeable certainty. “But I promise you'll eat well, and I'll make sure you're not too sore from how much I’ll be impaling you on my cock in the next few days.”

My mouth drops open as he walks into the room. “Excuse me? Who says I’m going to fuck you again?”

“I don’t need permission, Cassidy.”

He hands me a steaming cup. It smells amazing, even though it’s not my usual bougie coffee, and I hate that I want it, that I want what he's offering in spite of myself. A bite of cold mountain air filters in through the gap in the door, making the blankets around me feel even more like a cocoon.

My hands wrap around the mug, craving warmth. “Is this how you get your kicks? Dragging women into the wilderness?”

His eyes meet mine, so damn earnest it makes me dizzy. “Only you.”

I take a long sip of coffee, letting it burn down my throat until I find my voice again. “I'm not your project.”

“No,” he says with that same calm intensity. “You're my obsession.”

The words should terrify me more than they do. Instead, something inside me unravels just a little more.

“I don't know how you expect this to work out,” I say finally, channeling every ounce of skepticism left in me.

His smile is infuriatingly relaxed. “It will.”

I stare at him for a moment longer and then sigh deeply, the sound carrying all my reluctant acceptance. “This better be one hell of a climb, I’m cold and would rather spend the day in bed.” At his bemused expression, I exaggerate a sigh. “No, not like that. Just sleeping.”

He laughs softly and grabs his pack, his movements fluid and sure as he shoulders our fate along with our gear. “I’ll make sure it’s worth getting out of bed,” he promises.

I’ll escape as soon as I can, maybe push him over the top of a cliff. For fucks sake, he killed Stuart! I shouldn’t be fucking with an insane person.

Nope. I am going back to the city, one way or the other.

“There’s clothes in the drawers. Should be your size.” He says as he fills two canteens with water.

I sigh again, loudly, just for good measure, hopping out of bed and shivering as the cool air hits my naked skin. Sure as shit, everything in here is my size. And it’s all name brand adventure clothing.

“What did you do, rob an outdoors store?” I call over my shoulder, rummaging through the drawers.

“Wouldn’t have needed to if you’d come prepared,” he says without missing a beat.

I pull on a thermal top and some ridiculously expensive hiking pants. Goddammit, they even fit like they’ve been tailored for me. As I dress, the feeling of being trapped tightens like a noose. He’s thought of everything, every angle, leaving me no room to breathe. I don’t know whether to be impressed or horrified.

The cabin door creaks open, and Noah steps out into the morning air. He stands there, expectant and patient, like he knows I’ll follow. I yank my hair into a ponytail and steel myself before stepping outside. The chill bites at me immediately, but it smells clean and wild—nothing like the city’s stale air.

“Hope you’ve got your hiking legs ready,” he says as we hit the trail.

“Hope you’ve got your life insurance paid up,” I mutter back.

The path slopes upward almost immediately, winding through towering pines and silent undergrowth. Every step feels like a rebellion as my boots crunch against gravel and soil. Noah moves ahead with an easy stride, occasionally glancing back to make sure I’m still there, still his.

“How long have you been planning this?” I ask between breaths.

“Since I saw you win a case a year ago.” He slows down enough to walk beside me, his presence both reassuring and infuriatingly steady.

“You really are insane.”

“Just determined.”

The way he says it makes my stomach flip, like my fear is fuel to him. I push on, the incline sapping my energy but not enough to ask him to take a break.

“If you think this is going to work—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“It already is. Trust the process, Cassidy.”

The trail narrows, and I have no choice but to fall in behind him. I can’t help staring at his back, broad and unwavering as he navigates the terrain. Finding all the easy spots to walk and climb. For some god forsaken reason, I’m picturing running down this hill, with him hot on my heels, wearing that stupid heart eyes mask.

A hawk cries overhead, and Noah halts, turning to face me. “Ever seen one up close?” His voice is soft now.

“Is this where you tell me you’re a falconer too?”

“Something like that.” He reaches out a hand, and for a moment, I think he’s going to touch me. But he doesn’t. He waits until I move closer, his dark eyes trapping mine for a moment.

We press on, the forest swallowing us in its dense embrace. The air is sharp and invigorating; it fills me with a strange, restless energy. Suddenly it hits me.

He could kill me out here and no one would ever find my body.

“You’re quiet,” he observes after a long silence.

“I’m trying to figure out how to escape,” I shoot back, testing him.

He smiles, the kind of smile that suggests secrets and promises all rolled into one. “Let me know when you’ve solved it.”

We reach a cliffside overlook, and the sheer drop takes my breath away. The mountains stretch endlessly, a vast and indifferent expanse that makes me feel both insignificant and oddly alive. Noah drops his pack and sits, his eyes scanning the horizon like he owns it.

“There’s a whole world out there,” he says, gesturing at the view as if he's offering it to me. “You really want to go back to your little office?”

I stand next to him, refusing to sit, but I can’t tear my eyes away from the distance. It’s awe inspiring, yet somehow anxiety inducing at the same time, just like everything about this goddamned trip.

He looks up at me, almost as if waiting for me to scoff before continuing. “Or maybe you’re afraid you’ll actually like it out here.”

It riles something in me—his calm certainty that he knows me better than I know myself. I hate how much I want to prove him wrong and right at the same time.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” My voice sounds weaker than I want it to.

He smirks knowingly, then pats the rock next to him. For a second, I almost sit down, almost give in to whatever this is between us. Instead, I grab a granola bar from his pack and start unwrapping it.

He’s watching me with an intensity that should feel invasive but doesn’t. Not anymore.

“You’re not very good at playing hard to get,” Noah teases.

“Maybe I’m not playing,” I retort, taking another bite.

I finally sink down beside him, more exhausted from resisting than from the hike itself. Silence stretches between us as we stare out at the sea of trees.

“Why me?” I whisper.

He doesn’t answer right away. I can almost hear him weighing his words, deciding how much to give. When he does speak, his voice is strained. “Because I saw something in you that needed the kind of freedom only I could give.”

I swallow hard, the granola suddenly dry and tasteless in my mouth. There’s an unsettling sincerity to what he says, like he genuinely believes it. “You’re delusional.”

His gaze locks onto mine, and I feel that familiar unraveling again, as if he’s pulling at something loose inside me. “Maybe,” he agrees lightly, “but here you are.”

I look away, focusing on the endless stretch of wilderness instead of the intensity of his eyes. Each time I try to outwit him with reason or logic, he answers with something so quietly self-assured that it shakes me to my core.

We sit there until the cold finally seeps through even Noah’s persistence. The sun dips lower in the sky, casting long shadows over the mountains. He rises and offers me a hand up, but I ignore it, standing on my own.

The way back feels different, much steeper than I thought it would be. Noah lets me lead for a while, staying close enough that I feel him even when I don’t see him. Every now and then, he’ll brush past to clear a branch or rock, quickening my pulse with each fleeting touch.

“Cassidy,” he calls as we near the cabin.

I stop but don’t turn around, waiting for him to catch up.

“You can have the bed tonight.”

“Why?”

“Just figured it was the gentlemanly thing to do.” He says before brushing past me and opening the cabin door.

I half debate on running, but stop at the look in his eye.

Was he… desperate? Desperate for what? Me? My approval?

“Well?” He motions for me to come in.

Looking back down the path that leads to the lodge, I sigh and step inside.

The one question I need answered sits in the back of my throat. “Have you ever done this to anyone else?” It spills out before I can stop it.

He closes the door, the sound final and enclosing. “No,” he says, almost too softly. “You’re the only one.”

Relief tangles with fear, desire knots with disbelief and all these emotions crash over me. I head to the bedroom and sit on the edge of the bed like I’ll melt into the floorboards if I don’t relax for a moment.

He watches me, gauging my reaction like it’s another step in his plan. The room is dim as he flicks on a lantern in the hall and another in the bedroom.

“If you want to leave…,” Noah starts, but he doesn’t finish. He doesn’t have to. We both know we’re beyond that now.

I lie back on the bed, exhaustion weighing down more than just my limbs. It’s a surrender and a challenge all at once, leaving him to interpret it as he will.

He stays where he is for a moment, then turns away towards the living room to tend to the fire. I hear him moving around, adding logs, coaxing flames to life until they crackle and spit warmth into the cabin. His patience is maddening but also oddly comforting; it’s like he knows there’s no need to rush what’s inevitable.

The heat seeps into me slowly, loosening muscles and maybe even a little bit of resistance. I close my eyes, just for a second.

When I open them again, stars are visible through the window, bright and indifferent against the night sky. Noah sits in a chair by the fire, his chair

angled just right so he can watch me.

“Don’t you ever sleep?” I mumble.

“Not when there’s better dreams when I’m awake than when I close my eyes, no.” He sighs, running his hand down his leg. “Don’t you want to change out of your hiking clothes? There’s pajamas in there somewhere too.”

It is kind of sweet, in a super creepy way, that he got me pajamas. I am super uncomfortable laying here in these hiking clothes, so I go and look for them.

Pink. My favorite color.

Damn him.

I change quickly before hopping back under the duvet. “Night, Noah.”

“Night, Cassidy.”

Sleep came easily, even with a pair of dark eyes trained on my back, watching my every breath.

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I did something that was well it was probably stupid and dumb, but fuck if it wasn't the most thrilling thing I have ever experienced in my life. I am realizing in such a small time that Noah likes the cat and mouse games. I played. I stood in front of that window knowing he was there watching and touched myself. He ran in like a man with the passion and need to meet mine. Its what I have been waiting for my entire life. He knew just what I needed and what I wanted. It was dare I say perfect. Afterwards I screwed up again by thinking and telling him that he isn't thinking enough. Why am I over thinking this so much. I am that hard up to get back to a crap job that I only kind of like? Or is this just the post sex I have a hot man with an amazing cock in my pussy talking? Things I need to think about fast.

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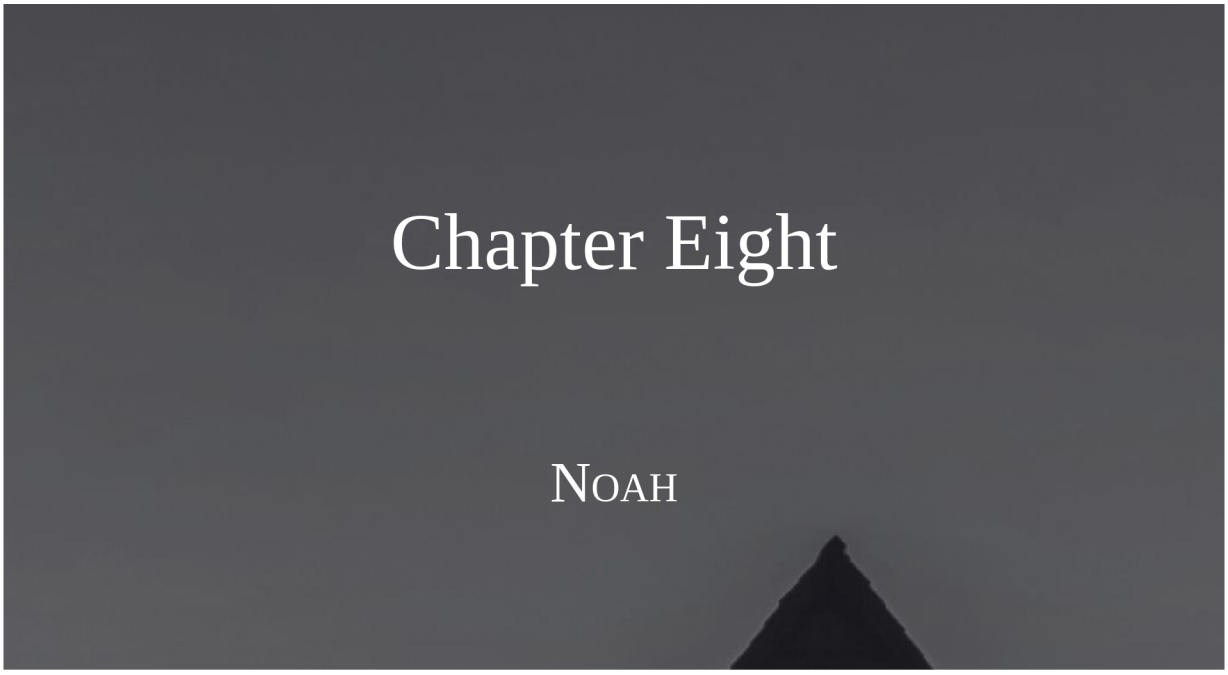


Chapter Eight

Noah

I LIED TO HER.

So fucking what.

If I had told her the truth, that no, she isn't the first woman I've brought here, she would have panicked and I finally fucking feel like she's warming up to the idea of staying here with me.

Besides, Alannah was years ago. My first attempt at finding love. She was beautiful, in a classical kind of way, but far too uptight. Always screaming, always trying to escape. She had loved her life in the city too much to appreciate the small things. Like the butterflies and dragonflies that grace the meadows just beyond the waterfall.

She had been a failure of epic proportions and Kairo was fucking furious that I had killed her. He kept saying he wanted a turn, but I'm too selfish for that. Besides, I didn't *kill* her. I was just chasing after her and she fell and smashed her head on a rock. I don't kill women unless absolutely necessary. She was breathing when I got to her, but she didn't make it. Might have if I'd have gotten her some help, but I didn't. What the hell else was I

supposed to do? Let her go and let her tell the cops about our little activities?

Yeah, that would go over well.

Hi officer, don't worry, we just hunt women up here, holding them captive until they agree that they're ours to keep. Please don't arrest us, I promise our motives are pure.

Kairo is such a fucking moron sometimes. I have about as much love for him as I can feel for another person, which isn't much, but it's enough for me not to club him to death when he pisses me off.

Which is often.

He told his friends about our cabins, which led to me beating him to within an inch of his life. This is supposed to be *our* thing. But, unfortunately for us, and the world really, his friends are even more depraved than he is.

Which leads me to this moment, here, with Cassidy.

Kairo never understands why I am the way I am. Why I am 'kind', his words not mine, to my marks.

Probably because I don't actually want to hurt them. I want them to love me the way I love them. And where Alannah failed, Cassidy won't.

I can see the love in her eyes, even if there's a healthy dose of fear in them too.

Which, to be honest, I expect.

In fact, I would probably be a little concerned if she had no fear at all.

That sense of self-preservation just means she is everything I have been searching for. Soft. Vulnerable. The perfect compliment to my darkness.

Once she realizes that I will never hurt her, she will wonder why she ever resisted me in the first place.

I listen to her breathing, getting more and more ragged until it evens out. My eyes begin to droop as the comforting music of her sleeping body takes over my senses.

I've done it this time. I know it. She's perfect.

And mine.

Forever.

Just as I'm about to drift off, an alert beep goes off. *Shit, shit, fuck.* I slip into the room and stand over Cassidy, making sure she's out before heading into the closet and opening the door to my security room.

Flipping the switch, the screens burst to life. Dana and Mike are heading up this way, about a mile down from my cabin.

What the fuck are they doing up here? They never come up this far.

I zoom in, seeing their breath puff out like steam in front of them. They're arguing, Dana's hands flailing wildly as they make their way over the frost. Mike drags his feet, shoulders hitched up to his ears.

Dana's voice crackles through the speakers. "You know Noah's gonna lose it when he sees us."

Mike shrugs, looking like a petulant child. "What the hell is he doing up here anyway?"

"Dunno, but I tracked him yesterday. Had that chick with him. Think they're boning."

"Then why the hell are we up here?"

"Because I'm tired of waiting for him to finish this little love affair," Dana snaps back, "he's mine, Michael. I want him. He just thinks he can fuck me and then abandon me because he found some pretty little lawyer? Fuck. THAT. I am gonna show him that I'm the one for him."

“He’s gonna be pissed, Dana. Why can’t you just be happy with me? We’ve been dating months now and you just can’t let this asshole go. Why are you always harping on that freak?”

Because you’re whining like a fucking pussy, Mike.

She turns, hands on her hips as she stares at him. “He will be fine with a little visit, okay? Just for closure, baby. Then we can start decorating your apartment and I’ll move in, okay?”

I grit my teeth and consider my options. They could survive if they turn around and go back to the lodge *and* if Dana gets it through her thick skull that she was nothing more than a come receptacle for me. If not... Well, I've got more than one way of dealing with them.

I turn and head into the bedroom, closing my door behind me. Cassidy shifts under the duvet as I lean over her, pressing my lips against her forehead. She stirs but stays asleep.

“Be back soon,” I whisper before clicking the bedroom door shut and slipping into my boots and coat.

The cold bites at my face as I step outside into the night air. It’s dark, but I know these woods like blood cells know veins. I move quickly, making sure not to leave any obvious tracks that might lead Cassidy to ideas she shouldn't have when she wakes up.

I catch sight of them before they see me. Dana is still talking—she never shuts up—and Mike looks like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Lost?” I call out.

Dana stops, her mouth dropping open. She closes and opens it a few times, looking like a startled fish. “Noah… I… I…”

“Yes, Dana?”

“I came to see you.” She finishes lamely.

I pause, staring at Mike who looks like his balls have shriveled into his stomach. “How did you find me?”

“Well… I followed you yesterday and saw that you brought that girl. I wanted to talk. About us.” She’s wringing her hands now, almost as if she regrets coming up here.

Honestly, it’s better that she did. I had no idea how deep her obsession for me was, and that poses a threat to everything we’re doing here.

“Oh. I see.” I motion down the path that leads towards the cliffs. “Come, I’ll show you my cabin.”

It is *a* cabin. But it’s not *my* cabin. It’s a… hunting cabin. With a very specific area.

Mike stammers, turning to head back down, “I think I’m just gonna go back.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous Mike. You’re soaked. Come, let’s warm up with some coffee.” I smile as wide as I can, the motion splitting my lip.

He stops in his tracks, like a deer that knows it’s fucked. Dana grabs his arm, yanking him back towards her. “See? I told you he’d be cool with it.”

“Cool isn’t the word I’d use,” Mike mutters.

Dana turns to me, eyes wide and hopeful. She thinks she’s won something here. “I knew you weren’t serious about her.”

“Of course not,” I say, leading them up the path towards the cliffs. The wind picks up, howling like an animal in heat. “You think so little of me?”

Her relief is almost embarrassing. Mike says nothing, but looks dejected as fuck. I don’t blame him… knowing your woman is pining after another man. But I *do* blame him for letting her come out here. *And* for letting her drag his ass out here too. *Utterly pathetic.*

The trees thin out as we reach the old hunting cabin perched precariously near the edge. It's falling apart and smells like fox piss inside, but this is as good as it's gonna get for them.

Dana shivers and pulls her coat tighter around herself as I push open the creaky door. "Wow, you actually do have a cabin up here," she says, trying to sound impressed.

"Yeah, I stay here when I just want a break from the retreat," I tell her, gesturing for them to enter first.

Mike hesitates but then ducks inside after Dana. They're in agreement on one thing at least—neither wants to be left out in the cold.

I stand at the threshold, watching their silhouettes against the dark interior. I think of Cassidy warm and perfect body at the real cabin, so beautifully unaware of how fucking close she came to being discovered.

The door slams behind them with a satisfying thud, shaking rain drops from the roof like a mini flood. Grabbing a thick piece of wood, I secure the outside. No windows big enough to escape, no way they're getting out of this door. Not unless Mike grows a pair and figures out how to break through. Which he won't. Because he's a little bitch.

I turn and head back through the woods as Dana's muffled voice screams my name over and over.

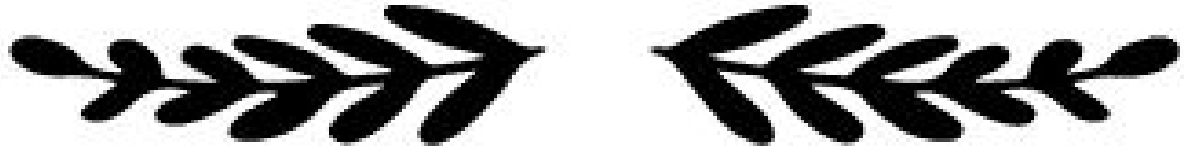
"I'll be back soon Dana!" I yell, smiling.

If they don't freeze to death, then my skinning knives are going to see some much-needed action. It's been a while since I've had to process meat.

The walk to my cabin is beautiful. I've always loved the smell of fresh rain and thankfully, it stops just long enough for me to enjoy the wildflowers that are springing up wherever patches of sun can pierce through the canopy.

I’ll have to bring Cassidy to the meadows. She will love it there.

Finally, I make it back to my cabin and close the door behind me, kicking off my boots and shucking my jacket. Exhaustion hits and I lay on the couch, pulling a blanket over me. A few hours of sleep and then I’m going to make my girl some breakfast. Hopefully I can distract her long enough today so I can slip out and go take care of my unwanted guests.



The morning comes with the sweet smell of coffee and pancakes as I finish up in the kitchen. Her sleep-addled eyes blink open, finding me exactly where I want to be— by her side with a steaming mug of coffee and blueberry pancakes in a neat little stack that would make Martha Stewart jealous.

She sits up, rubbing her eyes before stretching. “Morning.” Her voice is thick with sleep.

“Morning,” I say softly, handing her the mug as she shuffles back against the headboard. “Hungry?”

She looks at the plate and then at me, something like suspicion flitting across her face before softening into resignation. “Yeah.”

I leave her to eat while I try not to stare holes in the walls from the living room, sipping my own coffee and feeling more like a real couple than I ever did with Alannah.

It’s almost domestic, if you ignore how we got here.

Today, I want to take her to the falls and then show her the clearing beyond it. Looks like the weather will hold, even though the clouds are getting

darker. At the very least, if it does start to rain, I can give her a book and head out to ‘check on my traps’.

Disposing of Mike and Dana shouldn’t take more than a few hours. Worst case, I can string them up and bleed them out. It’ll take longer, and clean up is annoying as fuck, but it also means that dumping their bodies will be easy.

So much easier to dump a corpse if it’s been drained of blood first. Less chance of animals following the trail too.

Maybe I should call Kairo. I helped him with Kristine, maybe he can help me with these two assholes.

Before I make my choice, my girl comes to stand in the doorway, holding her cup.

“I… uh… can I have some more coffee?” She blushes as she speaks.

I nod, “Help yourself. Should be enough for another couple cups if you’d like. If you want to make a latte, I have a milk frother in the drawer.”

She looks almost shocked as she ponders on that before turning and heading into my modest kitchen. This cabin is small, that’s why it’s temporary, but I do my best to keep it stocked of modern amenities and I just so happened to do a big shop just before she checked in.

Speaking of checking in…

I should check her out before any other nosy Nellies decide they want to come sniffing around.

The milk frother buzzes quietly in the kitchen and I smile. She’s getting back to doing things that bring her joy. Soon, I’ll teach her how to hunt, how to fish. My intuition was right.

She is the one.

Cassidy returns with the steaming cup cradled in her hands; the hesitant smile she gives me a small victory. “You got a lot of stuff here for someone who’s supposed to be living off the grid.”

I shrug, watching her as she sits across from me, curling her feet underneath her. “I like my comforts,” I say, and she nods, sipping at the latte. “How’d you sleep?”

“Okay, I guess.” Her eyes find mine over the rim of her cup, guarded but curious. “Kind of surprised you didn’t try to… you know.”

“You were tired,” I tell her smoothly. “I want you ready for today.”

She tilts her head, suspicion and intrigue dancing across her face. She’s trying to figure me out. The way she studies me feels like a soft touch. Maybe someday she’ll admit it.

“What is today?” she asks, feigning disinterest.

“I thought we’d hike out to the falls.” I watch for her reaction. “And there’s a meadow I want you to see.”

“More hiking?” A ghost of a smile plays on her lips. She probably thinks I’m up to something.

“Unless you have other plans?” I keep my voice sincere even though we both know the answer.

Her shoulders relax, and she takes another sip before answering. “Fine. But if it rains like yesterday, you’re carrying me back.”

She’s joking—I think—but doesn’t realize how much I’d love that. “Deal,” I say.

The tension eases as we spend what feels like a real morning together. She’s less skittish now, more confident. Making her coffee’s and eating pancakes off the pan. Like a wild animal, she just needs to realize that safety is not something she has to fight for here.

Being in the wild isn’t like the city. There’s no competition out here. No rat race. Just pure, uninterrupted peace.

Well, *usually.* Dana and Mike have interrupted my peace, and they will pay for that. For every moment I’m forced to be away from Cassidy, they will feel it ten-fold.

But that’s an issue for later. For now, we eat and then go for a hike.

We finish breakfast, and I’m restless as she takes her time getting ready. I remind myself the more I allow her to feel like she’s making choices, the less likely she is to try and leave.

She emerges in the clothes I got her, somehow making even a thermal top look hot. “Ready?” There’s a challenge in her voice.

I grab our gear, excitement pushing me as we head out into the open. The mist is thick, and the mountains are draped in low clouds. It might rain, but Cassidy doesn't mention it again, falling into step beside me like it's natural.

She speeds up to walk beside me as the path widens. Grasping her hand in mine, I hold it tightly. Her eyes are wide as she looks up at me, but she doesn’t fight it. Doesn’t try to pull away. We walk in silence until we reach the falls. The water roars louder the closer we get until finally, we’re just steps from the water’s edge.

She let’s go of my hand and rushes forward to stand at the edge of the pool, mesmerized by the power in front of her. “Wow,” she breathes out.

I come up behind her, close enough to touch but holding back just enough to make her want to step towards me. She doesn’t. She just stands and stares at the water rushing from fifteen feet in the air.

The cabin I built us is just behind the small grove of trees. I can spot it from here, but she won’t be able to. It’s designed to blend in, to mold to its surroundings. To be hidden.

Safe.

Suddenly, Cassidy drops onto the moss and starts pulling off her boots and socks before stepping forward, squealing as the cold water hits her toes.

“God that’s freezing!” She says.

A smile washes over my face. “Yes. It’s glacier water. Comes directly from the top of the mountain. Freshest water you can drink.”

She eyes it skeptically, then crouches down to cup some in her hands, bringing it to her lips. I watch, captivated, as she drinks, a shiver running through her.

“Holy shit,” she gasps. “That’s amazing. Nothing like that bottled glacier water back home.”

I laugh, the sound surprising even me. “Told you.”

She cups some water in her hand and tries to splash me, but I’m too quick, dodging back and pulling her into my arms before she can react. Her breath catches but she doesn't pull away, looking up at me with bright eyes that match the sky just before a storm.

“Put me down,” she says, but there’s no force behind it.

I loosen my grip enough for her to slip away if she really wants to. She doesn’t. Just stays there, finding the rhythm of my heartbeat under her cheek. I can feel her breathing even out, her head pressing against my chest. My throat tightens. This is all I ever wanted.

“Well,” I say as the clouds grow darker above us, “if you’re not going to fight me…”

Cassidy pulls back slightly to look up at me. There's a challenge there and it ignites something in both of us. “Maybe I will.”

It’s the answer I didn’t know I needed.

“I’ve got something else I want to show you. This time of year, we get some amazing flowers. It’s just beyond the ridge.” Just as quick as I pulled her in, I let go. Cassidy stumbles back onto the mossy shore and I wait patiently as she slips on her socks and boots and starts walking further up the trail.

“Where are we going?” She calls over her shoulder.

“You’ll see. Just keep going straight.”

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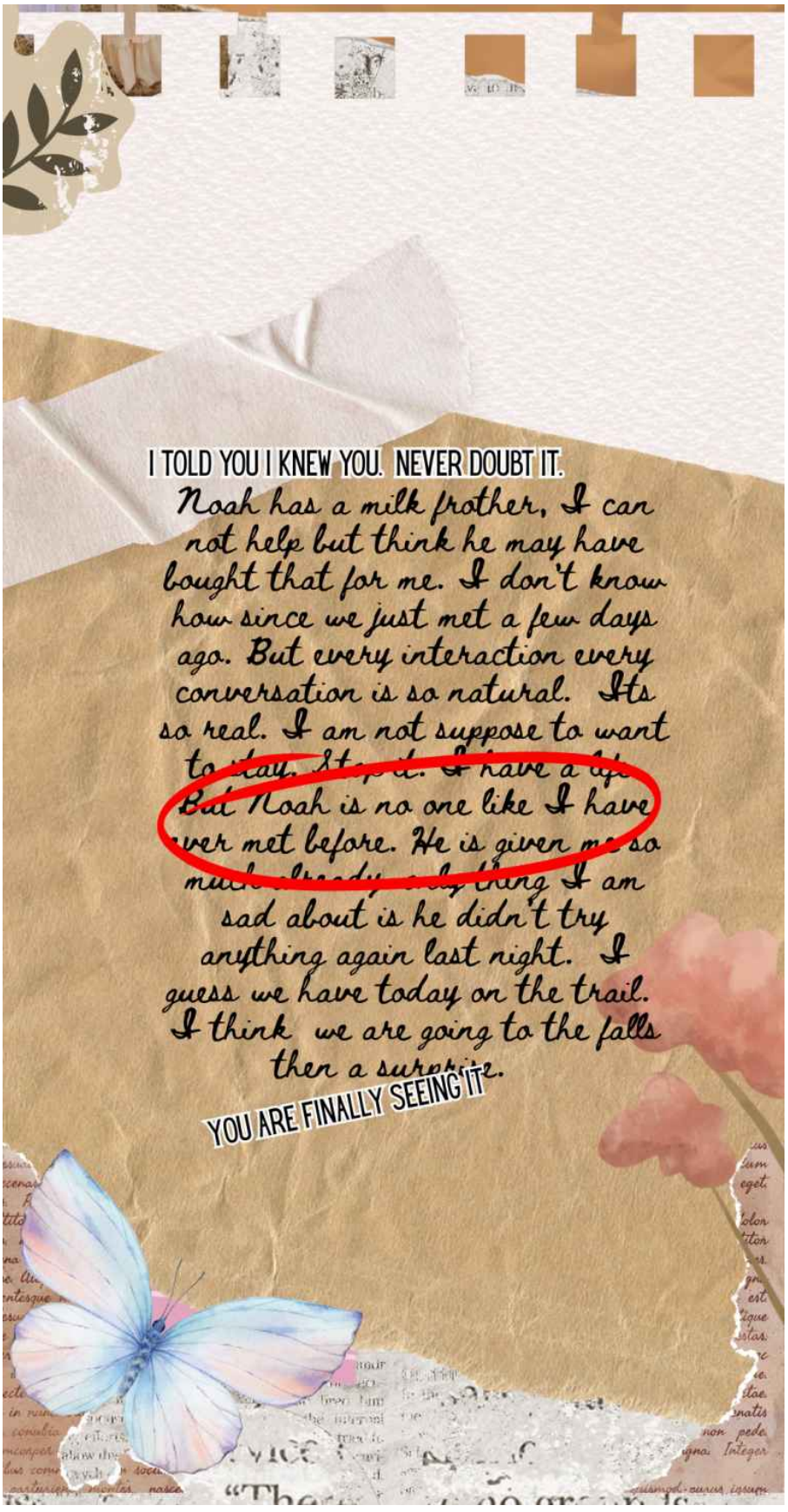
I TOLD YOU I KNEW YOU. NEVER DOUBT IT.
Noah has a milk frother, I can not help but think he may have bought that for me. I don't know how since we just met a few days ago. But every interaction every conversation is so natural. Its so real. I am not suppose to want to stay. Stupid. I have a life But Noah is no one like I have ever met before. He is given me so much already only thing I am sad about is he didn't try anything again last night. I guess we have today on the trail. I think we are going to the falls then a surprise.
YOU ARE FINALLY SEEING IT

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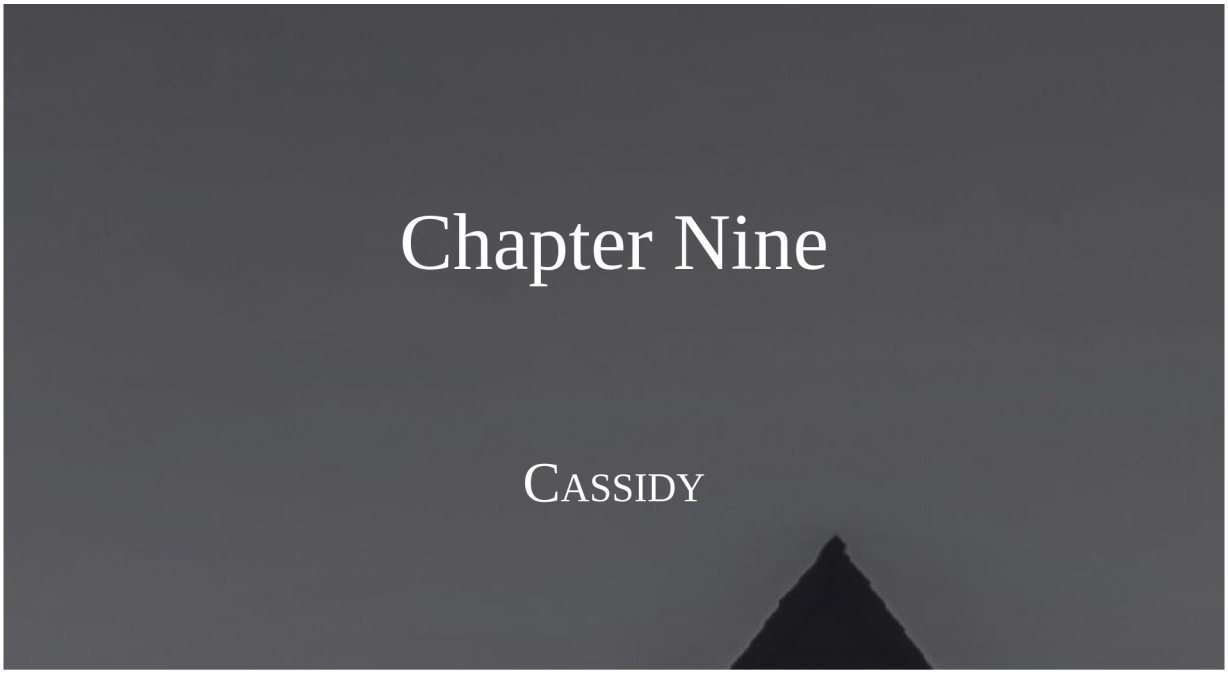

Chapter Nine

CASSIDY

IT REALLY IS BEAUTIFUL here. Being so high up, it seems to rain frequently, but I don't mind as much as I thought it would. Back in the city, rain sometimes evaporates before it hits the ground, everything is so fogged up with pollution we can't see the stars.

Maybe Noah will let me lay outside tonight and watch them come out. Star gazing had always been one of my all-time favorite things to do as a kid. Hadn't done it in years.

"So… did you like the falls?" He asks, almost as if looking for my approval.

I grin, "I did. I'm excited for this meadow you're talking about."

"It's a few more steps, through those trees and we will be there." He comes up beside me, his pace matching mine as we lapse into silence.

Half of me wonders why he didn't just ask me on a date instead of kidnapping me, but then I wonder if I'd have even agreed if he had.

Probably not.

I am… *was*… still hung up on Stuart. Yes, he cheated on me, but he was familiar. Safe. We were also together for years.

I shiver at the thought of all that safety now.

“Here we are,” Noah says, pulling me back into the moment.

We step through the tree line and it’s like entering another world. The meadow is carpeted with wildflowers, their colors almost surreal against the green. I’m speechless. Long grasses sway in the wind.

It’s straight out of some movie where people frolic and dance, giggling as they run through the field.

“Told you,” he says, smugly satisfied.

I wander in a daze, feeling his eyes on me but not caring for once. It’s too breathtaking to worry about his intentions. I stop and kneel to touch a patch of purple blooms, their petals damp and cool under my fingers. A drop of rain hits my cheek, then another. I look up, and a few more splatter against my skin.

“It’s starting to rain,” Noah says, watching me closely.

“Yeah,” I breathe out, not moving. “So?”

His smile is quicksilver, here and gone before I can blink. “So,” he says, “I guess the city slicker in you will want to head for cover.”

“You had no issues leaving me tied to a tree.”

“True.”

I hesitate. “I’d like to stay a bit longer… if that’s okay.”

He nods, pulling a blanket out of his pack and laying it on the ground. He’s careful not to squish any of the flowers and I make a note of that.

Despite his… darkness, he truly does care for the wilds out here.

“Want to take a seat?” He says as he sits.

I hesitate, then join him on the blanket. The rain is steady and cool, but something about it is freeing. Refreshing. I close my eyes and tip my face up towards the sky, feeling each drop like a tiny electric shock.

“You’re different out here,” I say, eyes still closed.

There’s a long pause, the only sound the hiss of rain and the distant rumble of thunder.

“You mean I’m not tying you to a tree?” He jokes, his voice low and rough.

I open my eyes and glare at him, but there’s less heat in it than I intend. Maybe I am going soft.

“Seriously though… why did you do this? Why didn’t you just ask me out?” The question spills out before I can stop it.

He shifts closer, leaning back on his hands. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. And I knew you’d reject me. Plus, the hunt is half the fun. It’s not as fun when it’s just given. Love has to be earned.”

What the fuck does that even mean?

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know you better than you think.” There’s something fierce in his voice. Conviction. “We want the same things.”

I shake my head, pulling my knees up to my chest as another shiver runs through me. “And what’s that?”

“To belong somewhere… with someone.” His gaze is intense, pinning me in place. I should be scared, but there’s a part of me that thrills at the attention.

His fingers brush my arm lightly, barely contact at all, but enough to set off sparks under my skin.

“Stuart ever make you feel like this?”

“No,” I whisper before I can catch myself. *Damn it.*

He pulls away slightly but doesn’t look smug or triumphant like I expect. Just focused. Determined.

“I—” My words die as he leans over, cups my chin in his big hand and raises it so I have no choice but to look him in the eye.

It happens slowly.

His head moving forward, his eyes closing. I have enough time to move, to run, to escape.

But my body betrays me and I move forward, capturing his lips in a kiss that’s slow as it is sensual.

I can feel his smile against my mouth, a knowing curve that makes me dizzy with anger at my loss of choice and something dangerously close to excitement. His hand wraps around the back of my neck, pulling me in deeper until I’m practically sitting in his lap. Thunder cracks nearby, but I barely hear it over the blood rushing in my ears.

When we finally break apart, I’m breathless, panting like I’ve just run a damn marathon.

“See?” he murmurs, his breath hot against my cheek. “You can’t pretend you don’t feel it too.”

“I don’t—” But even as I say it, I know it’s a lie. I can’t pretend here, not in this wilderness where every emotion is raw and exposed.

“Admit it, Cass.” He pulls me closer, like he’s trying to merge us into one person. “Out here, you feel alive.”

I’m trapped by more than just his arms. It’s this place, this moment—a confining freedom that makes no sense. “You’re insane.”

“Only about you.” He says it with such sincerity that it borders on terrifying.

I shuffle back an inch, needing space to breathe or think or maybe just to remember I was supposed to hate him a second ago. “This isn’t right,” I say, grasping at anything familiar to hold onto.

“It will be.”

The rain slows to a drizzle, and a chill sets in that has nothing to do with the weather. He slowly unzips my jacket and trails his fingers down my body before slipping them inside the waistband of my pants. He touches me, sending sparks skittering across my skin before he pulls his hand out, licking his fingers with a groan.

“Time to head back.”

I stand on shaky legs as he grabs the blanket, half stuffing it in the pack before taking my hand and dragging me across the meadow, back the way we came.

It’s a rush as I try to find my footing, but he doesn’t stop, he just growls at me to keep up and before I know it, he’s opening the cabin door and forcing me inside, shutting it behind us.

He’s on me in an instant, stripping me of my defenses.

I gasp as his touch ignites a fire I can’t control.

His grin is wolfish, predatory. “Time to strip.”

I slap his hand away, more of a token protest than I want to admit. “No. Noah. This...”

“Don’t reject me, Cassidy. It won’t end well for you.” He moves with the same deliberate slowness, pulling my jacket off my shoulders and tossing it aside. The wet fabric hits the floor with a slap, and I shiver. He makes quick work of the rest of my clothing, until I’m fully exposed and he’s still standing there in his wet clothes.

“Noah,” I start, but his name comes out shaky and uncertain.

“Tell me you want to leave.” He challenges me moving further into my space, forcing the air out of my lungs.

“I—” The words vanish when he tugs me back into his arms, and I hate that it feels like coming home.

He lifts me effortlessly, carrying me across the cabin to the sprawling bed covered in thick blankets. He lays me down gently, an unexpected tenderness in the way his hands linger on my skin. His fingers work at pulling off his sweater and then his shirt, undoing the button on his pants and dropping them in a messy heap. He’s left in his boxers until soon, those are gone too.

He’s gorgeous. All muscle. All male. I want to run my tongue over the dips and curves of the hard planes of his skin. But I don’t. I just lay there and watch as he turns and grabs new boxers, and a dry pair of pants, leaving his chest bare before coming down on top of me.

“We shouldn’t,” I say, but there’s no conviction in it. Just longing. I notice he likes this power dynamic.

Me, naked. Him, clothed.

It’s like he wants to show me that no matter what, he will always know everything about me, while he stays shrouded in mystery.

“Yet, we will.” He presses against me; all heat and muscle and unyielding obsession.

My resolve crumbles as his fingers thread through my hair, tugging just enough to remind me who’s really in control here. His lips find mine again, and this time there’s no hesitation. It’s fierce and consuming, forcing me into his orbit.

I tangle my hands in his hair, pulling him closer like he's the only thing keeping me tethered.

He breaks away just enough to whisper, “You’re mine, Cassidy. Say it.”

I bite down on the refusal that almost escapes. Part of me wants to scream it, the part that’s wild and reckless and new.

His grip tightens, and I know he’s not moving until he hears what he wants.

I inhale sharply, words spilling out before I can stop them. “I’m yours.”

The room spins as I admit it, and a triumphant light flares in his eyes. He kisses me again, harder this time, like he’s sealing a promise we both know I can’t take back.

Everything is heat and friction and the bewildering thrill of surrender. I lose myself in it, lose myself in him, until all that exists is this moment. My hips buck up, desperate for friction, and I earn myself a rumble from his laugh.

“No sex right now, minx. We’re going to nap and then make dinner.”

I groan in frustration, but he swallows it with his lips.

When he finally pulls back, we’re both breathing hard. He strokes my cheek with surprising gentleness, like he’s afraid I’ll disappear.

“No more back and forth. You’ll always be mine,” he says, a command wrapped in a plea.

I nod because I can’t trust my voice right now. Because I don’t want to run anymore.

His smile is devastatingly satisfied as he settles beside me on the bed, pulling me close against his chest. We lie there in silence, the storm outside mimicking the one inside me.

Eventually, sleep tries to claim me, but bits of doubt creep in at the edges. This is real. This is madness. And yet...

Noah’s breathing is steady and possessive even in rest. His arm is a steel band around my midsection. I want him to take me, to own me, but he is the master of teasing me until I want to burst from need.

I shift, turning my body so my leg drapes over his, my pussy rubbing against his pants. Looking up at him, his chest rising and falling in a predictable pattern, he’s fast asleep.

Shame burns through me. I haven’t dry humped anyone since I was fifteen, in the back of David’s mom’s pick-up truck at the drive in theater, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Slowly, my hips roll, generating some friction, but not near enough.

I scoot closer, angling my body so I can rub along the seam of his pants. I bit down on my lip, holding in the whimper that tries to escape as I grind on his leg. He’s still fast asleep, so I go harder.

He shifts slightly, and I freeze, waiting for him to wake up and catch me being the greedy girl he’ll accuse me of being. But he just murmurs something incoherent and adjusts, his leg pinning me even tighter against him.

A spasm of frustrated need seizes me. I can’t take it anymore. I shake his shoulder roughly, all thoughts of subtlety gone. “Noah,” I hiss in the darkness.

His eyes flutter open, slowly focusing on me with a sleepy smile. “Already begging?” he teases with a chuckle.

“Yes,” I say, shameless now.

In one fluid motion, he rolls on top of me, his weight holding me in place. His mouth crashes down on mine, swallowing my gasp of relief. I clutch at his back, desperate to pull him closer, but he breaks away again, leaving me panting beneath him.

“I like waking up to you needing me this much,” he says. His hands move to my wrists, pinning them above my head.

“Then do something about it,” I dare him.

His laugh is warm and wicked against my neck. He kisses a slow trail down my throat, making sure to take his time again now that he knows he can. Each deliberate pause is torture as his lips work their way lower, over my breasts and down my stomach.

I think I'm going to explode from want when he finally takes a peaked nipple in his mouth and sucks before biting down. His hand trails between my legs, feeling how wet I am. How needy. How achingly desperate for his touch. He sits back on his knees for a moment, taking in the sight of me sprawled beneath him.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs. He slides off the edge of the bed and undoes his pants, going as slow as humanly possible, as my eyes drink in the sight of his perfection.

I shudder as he roams my body with his gaze, exposed and throbbing. My legs fall open, hoping the sight is enough to get me what I want.

“Noah,” I breathe, a plea.

He grips my ankles and pulls me to the edge, spreading me wide before him. “Say my name again.”

“Noah.”

He leans in, his mouth so close I can feel his breath hot against my skin. His lips brush teasingly along my inner thigh, open-mouthed kisses that make me moan and writhe and strain against his hold. He pins my hips with one hand, laughs deep and low at my desperate struggle against him.

“Patience,” he whispers.

I want to scream. But then his mouth is on me, and it’s electric—the way he takes what he wants from me, how mercilessly he devours until my vision goes white and I’m nothing but nerve endings and raw surrender. My cries

echo in the cabin as I come undone, shaking apart under his relentless assault.

His smile is feral as he finally climbs back over me, kissing my lips so I can taste myself on his tongue. “You liked that,” he says.

“Obviously.”

He thrusts into me with one hard stroke that knocks the breath from my lungs. My body arches into him as he sets a punishing rhythm, his hands tangled in my hair, pulling just hard enough to keep me deliciously on edge. Every thrust pushes me closer to unraveling, every raw gasp from him telling me how close he is too.

Then he slows, pulling me away from the edge. My grabs my legs, lifting them over his forearms before his hand comes down on my throat, squeezing until I have a pinhole to breathe out of.

“Tell me who owns you,” he demands, his voice deep and raspy, as if he’s teetering out of control, but desperately trying to stay above water.

I choke out his name, my pulse racing beneath his tightening grip. My vision dims around the edges, the world narrowing to the sensation of him inside me, the pressure on my neck making every nerve spark to life.

“Say it.”

I can barely get it out this time, a rasping sound that sends him over the edge. He slams into me with reckless force, his control slipping as he lets out a guttural moan. I follow him into oblivion, my body convulsing as I gasp for air, my legs trembling as he slowly lowers them off his forearms, every inch of me burning.

He collapses against me, both of us panting. His weight is heavy and perfect, pinning me down in a way that makes it impossible to think about

anything but him. There's nowhere else in the world except here, nowhere else I want to be.

We lie there in silence, tangled together on the bed. The only sounds are our breathing and the creak of the cabin settling around us. Then he shifts slightly, rolling onto his side and pulling me with him so we're face to face, his dark eyes boring into mine.

"What am I going to do with you?" His thumb traces gentle circles on my jawline.

My heart stutters at the tender touch. "Let me go?" I try for defiant, but it comes out breathless.

His lips curl into a wicked smile. "Not a chance."

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me closer, burying his face in my hair. His breath is warm against my ear as he murmurs words I can barely catch. Something about fate, about how I belong to him and always have. Words I'm not sure I want to hear just yet, but there's part of me that already believes them.

His presence is all-consuming, a force of nature tying me to this place, this moment. I should be scared. I should fight him, find a way out of this twisted dream. Instead, I sink deeper into him, my mind and body betraying every reason I had for coming here alone.

His breathing slows, the tension in his muscles easing as he drifts toward sleep. I stay awake, watching his face relax into something almost boyish and innocent. It's hard to reconcile this side of him with the man who tracked me for a year, the man who orchestrated this entire week-long trip to trap me in his world.

I close my eyes and try to surrender to sleep too, but my mind won't shut off. It wants to replay every moment we've shared since I got here, like it's

trying to memorize all of it before it slips away. The first day when he showed up at my cabin, his sudden appearance so shocking and magnetic that everything else blurred into the background. The way he knew every little detail about me before I even said a word.

“Go to sleep, Cassidy.” He rumbles.

“I’m trying.”

He sighs, getting off the bed and tucking the duvet around me. “I’ll make you some chamomile tea.”

I watch him move across the room, my mind still buzzing as he fills a kettle with water and sets it on the stove. His movements are unhurried, deliberate, like he has all the time in the world. Each step is a reminder of how effortlessly he’s taken control of everything—including me.

The warmth of the duvet and exhaustion start to pull me under. I close my eyes, listening to the sounds of him tending to me. The clink of a cup, the soft whistle of steam rising. It’s strangely domestic, this kidnapping.

I’m almost asleep when I hear his voice again, gentle but insistent. “Here.”

I force my eyes open as he holds out a steaming mug. I sit up enough to take it, the heat soaking into my hands as I bring it to my lips. He watches me intently, like he’s making sure I drink every last drop.

“Thanks,” I murmur, feeling lethargy creep in.

He strokes my hair, his touch featherlight now. “Anything for you.”

The tea is working its magic, mellowing everything except my thoughts. How far will he go? How far will I let him? His obsession is terrifying—intoxicating. It should make me run, but all I want is to collapse into him again.

Noah waits until my blinks grow longer and slower before he takes the empty mug from my hands and sets it on the nightstand. He sits on the end

of the bed and just strokes my hair as my eyelids refuse to stay open any more.

Before I know it, I've drifted into a peaceful sleep.

And I barely noticed him disappearing into the closet, certain it's just part of my dream.

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We went to a random field of wild flowers. He can't be all bad if he brought me to a field of flowers and was careful not to squish them. Noah did say something really odd though. I asked him why he did all of this instead of just asking me out. Response. Love needs to be earned. Another thing to think on, this was suppose to be a week of unplugging. How did it turn into changing my whole life. But I do know one thing I hope we can go look at the stars later.

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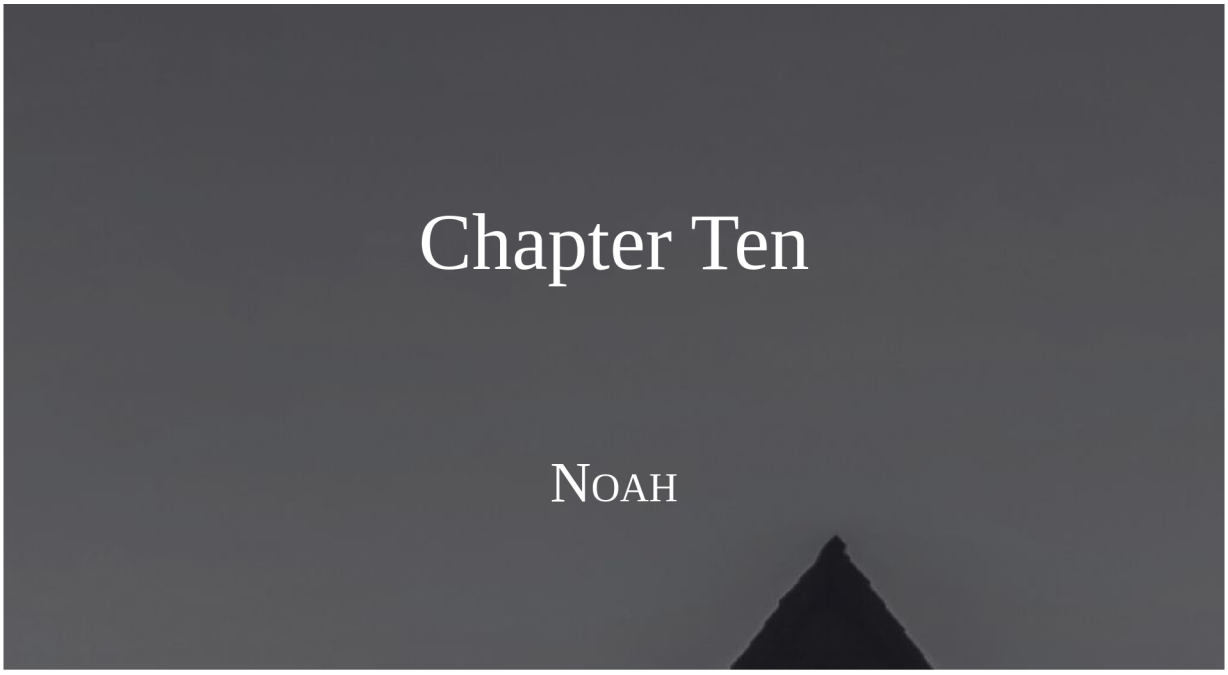

Chapter Ten

Noah

THIS DAY RAN AWAY from me. Cassidy should have been asleep over an hour ago and now it was getting dark.

Which means dumb and dumber were sitting in the hunting cabin, either frozen to death or scared out of their minds.

Hopefully the latter. I have something I want to try on them.

It’s not without great effort that I tore myself away from the sleeping form of my girl and headed into my security room to check on the status of my prisoners.

The screens flicker to life as I click through the varying trail cams, landing on the one I want to see.

Not dead. Definitely feeling dejected though, if Mike’s body language was anything to go by. Dana was standing over his hunched-up form, screaming at him and gesturing wildly.

A coil of disgust rolls through me. I can’t believe I entertained the thought of her for those few weeks. She was nothing like my little minx, and everything I despised about the stupid fucks who come here.

Weak. Small. Empty-headed.

And she thought she would be with me?

Pathetic.

I click off the screens, grabbing my hunting knife and some rope I keep back here for special occasions. The kind that is strong and not easy to escape from. My gaze lands on my tranquillizer gun. That could be fun. Grabbing it, I take a few darts. Enough to tranquilize a moose. Quietly, I exit the room, pausing briefly to ensure my girl is long into dreamland.

The tea should knock her out for a while. I put some Valerian Root powder in it, which is pretty powerful as a sleep aid.

I watch her chest rise and fall, a slow rhythm that pulls me in, makes me want to wrap myself around her and never let go. But I have a job to finish first.

Just some loose ends to tie up before she can be mine. Forever.

Our cabin is waiting for us, but I can't take her there until everything is safe.

Shit, I forgot to check her out of the retreat. Damnit. I make a mental note to do that when I'm done with Dana and Mike.

I grab my flashlight and head out into the woods, the sky growing darker with each passing minute until it swallows the light. The chill bites through my clothes as I make my way up the trail toward the hunting cabin. The wind is fierce, howling between the trees like it's trying to tear them from the ground. It's pitch black except for the beam cutting through the mist, illuminating the path only a few feet ahead at a time.

By the time I get close, Dana's screeching is loud enough to hear over the wind. Perfect. I click off my flashlight and move silently through the last stretch of woods, their voices growing louder and clearer.

“How the fuck can he just leave me here!” Dana shrills. “You, I understand, you’re a stupid, weak, spineless fuck! But me? How could he do this to me? NOAH! NOAH! Get your ass back here!”

Finally, something I can give you. My presence. Too bad it won’t be in the way you’d expect.

Mike mumbles something unintelligible back at her, probably trying to defend himself without much success.

Idiots. She actually thought she could come here and take Cassidy’s place? That I’d just abandon everything I’ve worked for because Dana decided she wanted a piece of this?

I slip up behind the cabin, peering in through the window. Mike is slumped on an upturned crate, his head buried in his hands. Dana is pacing in front of him like a caged animal, her breath visible as angry clouds in the cold air. They’re so caught up in their little drama they have no idea I’m watching.

Definitely more scared than dead. Time to show them what being hunted really feels like.

Putting a dart in the gun and placing the gun through the slit in the wall, I aim it at Dana. It’s a tough shot, given my only light is from the small gas lamp one of them figured out how to turn on.

Her screaming has become annoying enough that I cannot wait for it to cease. With precision, the dart flies from the gun, embedding itself in the side of her face. *Whoops.*

She yells, her hand coming up to grab at it, pulling it out and staring at it. “NOAH! What the fuck! No—”

Thunk.

One down, one to go.

At this point, Mike's eyes are as wide as saucers, trying to see where I am, cowering in the corner. "Noah, please… let me go. I'll never come back here. I'll quit working at the retreat. Just, please. Let me go."

No can do, sir. You've seen too much and somehow, entirely not enough.

I take aim and shoot, his dart finds it's mark in his leg, as he screams. His scream is even worse than Dana's. High-pitched. Nauseating.

Fucking pussy.

Pulling the gun out, I lean against the outer wall until I hear his body slump, knocking over the crate in the process.

Ahhhh, blissful silence.

I walk around the front and push open the cabin door. Grabbing Dana by her legs, I drag her limp body away from Mike's, so I can start my work without bumping into one or the other. Taking the rope from my pack, I get to work, and within a few minutes I have them both tied up so securely that Houdini would have a tough time escaping. I double-check the knots before grabbing onto Dana's wrists with both hands and pulling her toward the back of the cabin.

They deserve this. They're lucky they got as far as they did.

The hang room is ready for them. Grabbing the gas lamp, I set it on the stainless-steel countertop, hissing my displeasure at the sight before me. It has stains from previous guests. Ones that Kairo and his friends have toyed with. Ones that didn't make the cut for being good enough in their rot addled brains. Fucking dolt doesn't ever clean up after himself. It is disgusting. I actually use this room for real meat.

Heaving, I hoist Dana up with ease, securing her on one of the hooks along the wall by the ropes tying her hands before heading back to grab Mike.

His body isn’t as light, but he still weighs around the same as an adult black-tailed buck. Easy lifting. His clothes catch and tear on the rough wood as I drag him into the room and drop him, making sure his hook is secure. Both of them look pathetic in their slack-jawed states, though Dana moans a little as consciousness starts to creep back in.

I lift Mike up and secure him onto his new resting place before stepping back to admire my handiwork. The ropes dig into their skin, holding them upright, while their heads loll forward like broken dolls.

I wipe my hands off on Mike’s jacket, a smirk playing at my lips as I watch Dana's eyes flutter open. “What… where…”

“Hey there,” I say, leaning against the wall with satisfaction swelling in my chest. “Comfortable?”

Dana struggles weakly against her restraints, panic lighting up in her eyes as she takes in her surroundings. Her voice comes out in a pathetic whine. “Noah, you motherfucker!”

“I’ve been called worse,” I say, letting the words roll off with amusement. “But right now, you’re the ones in a bit of a bind.”

She kicks uselessly, trying to swing herself free. I watch her flail for a few moments, enjoying the show as she spits and curses. Mike is still out cold. He won’t be waking up for a while judging by the twitching in his face.

“You think you can get rid of me like this?” Dana hisses, her voice cracking. “I’ll—”

“Yeah, I do,” I say, cutting her off with a casual shrug.

Her eyes burn into me with sheer hatred, and it’s almost touching how much she thinks that matters. As if she has any power left here.

“Cassidy doesn’t want you,” she sneers. “She’s going to run, just like Alannah. You don’t think I know about what you boys do up here? I know

everything, Noah Cross."

Not smart to admit to knowing my extracurricular activities, but Dana was never the most useful tool in my belt. I step closer, my presence looming over her as I run my fingers over her cheek. "We both know you have no idea what Cassidy wants."

"She—"

"Try not to tire yourself out too much," I say, standing back up and turning away from them both. "We're going to be having all sorts of fun together."

"She will never accept you for who you truly are, Noah! I have, I will!" Dana's renewed screaming follows me out of the cabin, and I shut the door tight behind me. The wind catches it just as it closes, slamming it hard enough that everything inside rattles. That should keep them occupied until morning. It's too damn dark right now to do what I wanted to do.

The darkness welcomes me back like an old friend as I head down the trail toward Cassidy and the cabin. The wind wraps around me, and I can almost hear it whispering her name. *Cassidy Cross*. It's only a matter of time before she sheds everything that's holding her back and accepts what I've brought her here for.

To be my mountain goddess.

The light from the cabin spills out in a warm glow, a stark contrast to the cold shadows of the forest. She's inside, passed the fuck out, resting. Tomorrow, I will take her down to the lodge and see how she behaves. See if she's reformed enough for me to trust her in the company of others. If she can't behave, then she will be punished. I expect her resistance. Welcome it, even. Seems like she's going to keep me on my toes, and there's something invigorating about that.

If she’s a good girl, she can stay at the lodge while I deal with my visitors. Maybe I’ll hire her into Dana’s position. Might keep her busy enough.

I could have had Dana or any number of the women who work for me. Any of the female guests as well. Many of the ones I’d fucked had been married, all in various states of rot. Soul rot. They weren’t worth any of this. The effort I put in here. They were enough to act as bed warmers back in cabin 12, but never quite hit the notes of what I need in *the one*. None of them were enough to quell the urges that live inside me. They hit on me, tried to seduce me, allowed me to use their bodies, and left disappointed. It was all so predictable. Boring.

But Cassidy… she’s different. Feisty. A challenge. Worth every second of this year-long wait.

I open the door quietly, not wanting to wake her. Setting my pack down just inside the door, I strip down to my boxers and set about making some coffee. She should be out for the night, which gives me time to rearrange her life for her.

The kettle is placed over the fire and I head back to my security room, grabbing my laptop and bringing it out to the living room before flopping onto the couch.

My Wi-Fi is slow as it boots up, but chokes to life and blinks, waiting for me to input my password. I type it out with an annoyed sigh as it takes several seconds to load my desktop. I’ll need to call the satellite company in the morning.

My notifications start piling in as the internet chugs along, and I lean back into the couch, content to sort out what needs to be done next.

Cassidy is an ember waiting for a gust of wind. A boulder teetering on the edge of a cliff. Her files sit on my desktop, and I open them up, flipping

through browser tabs. It's easy enough to change her life from here, to reshape everything she thought she knew into what she's meant to become.

Message boards, online groups, new contracts, old friends.

I delete her account on a law forum first, then unfollow some of her connections on social media. Her old life starts slipping away, piece by piece. Next is an email from Stuart that makes me laugh out loud. It's dated the night before I lopped his cock off.

Miss you tons! Call me when you get back from your retreat?

I suppose I should reply, just to give the illusion that I don't know he's dead in his bathtub. Checking over his socials, nothing new is posted so it's safe to assume he didn't make it.

My fingers hover over the keyboard before I type out a quick reply.

Don't wait for me.

Then I hit send and watch it disappear into cyberspace like smoke.

She stirs in the bedroom, mumbling something unintelligible as she shifts under the covers. Her dreams are probably taking her places she doesn't want to go yet. Places where her restraint reigns supreme and nothing else matters.

I smile as I post a picture I took of her on a hike. "Happy in paradise, might never come back."

The notifications roll in.

You better! I miss you, girlfriend!

Yo! That looks amazing, fuck work, stay out there. That's what I would do.

Monique's name pops up and I click her message. *Hey, girlfriend, haven't heard from you in a while, how's things going? Starting to get worried.*

I laugh. *Sorry, girl, I've been so busy! Met a guy up here. Gonna stay a while longer. Let the office know I won't be back for an indeterminate*

amount of time. Chat soon xox

That should stave away any pretense of her coming back on her scheduled return date. Though, Monique is persistent, judging by these messages, and I'll need to let Cass talk to her, or things might go sideways.

The kettle whistles, and I get up to go pour myself some coffee.

She's a stubborn one, and it's going to take time to break her in completely. I take a sip of the bitter brew, enjoying the way each drop burns as it goes down.

As I head back to my spot on the couch, Cassidy moans softly in the bedroom. She stirs again, tossing and turning, confirming what I knew already: she's not ready to give in yet. She will be soon enough. Hopefully, she's having good dreams of me, but nightmares will do just fine.

With her connections slowly severed, it becomes easier to imagine how isolated she must feel. How desperate she will become once she realizes there won't be anything to go back to. Her remaining contacts will reinforce our narrative for her whether they want to or not; there won't be anyone left who can help her escape me.

I set my mug down on the table and crack my knuckles before diving back into her files. There are still a few loose ends that need tying up, some names that need erasing from her life entirely. Carter is next on the list. He is a partner in her firm, and seeing the lewd emails he's sent her, he deserves to die.

But I don't have time to give him the justice he deserves for those disgusting photos he's sent her, so instead, I screenshot them and send them to everyone in the firm. Because I'm generous, I include his clients as well.

Let it all burn.

Shaking my head, I wonder why the fuck she was holding onto this life so hard. It's very clear these men don't value her. They only want her body; they could give two fucks about her mind.

Not like I do.

After an hour, her life has been cleaned. Over the next few weeks, I will slowly phase her out of using socials entirely, leaving the world to believe she's decided a life in the woods is what she's chosen.

With a smile, I close my laptop and lean back, shutting my eyes for a moment.

It's all coming together.

The only thing left is to get rid of my pesky guests and see if Cassidy will be obedient enough to take a trip down to the lodge.

I'd hate to have to kill everyone in the place if she isn't.

But if it comes to that, I will do what's necessary to keep her here.

Keep her *mine*.

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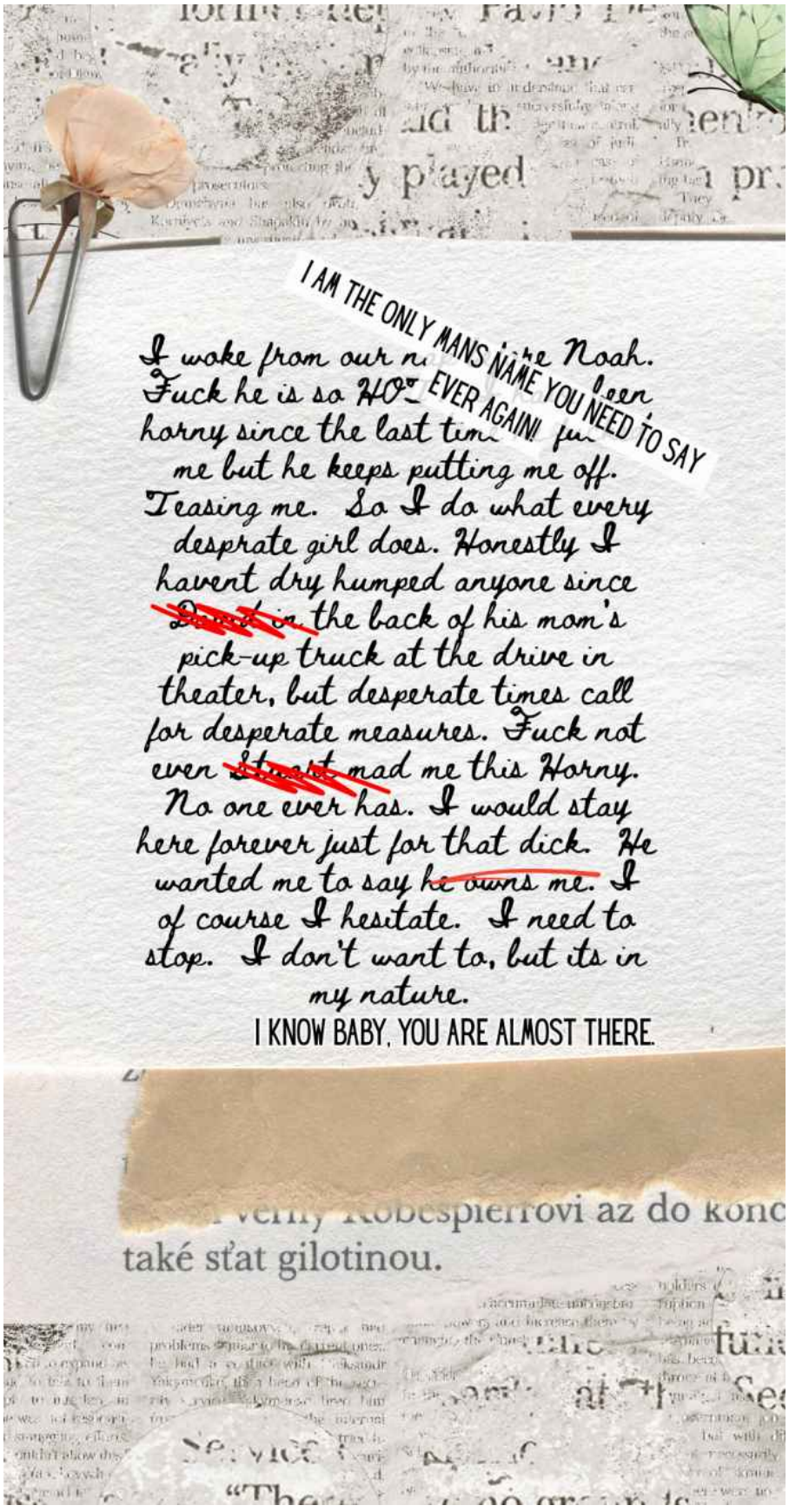
I AM THE ONLY MANS NAME YOU NEED TO SAY
I wake from our n e Noah.
Fuck he is so HOT EVER AGAIN! fu
horny since the last tim
me but he keeps putting me off.
Teasing me. So I do what every
desprate girl does. Honestly I
havent dry humped anyone since
in the back of his mom's
pick-up truck at the drive in
theater, but desperate times call
for desperate measures. Fuck not
even mad me this Horny.
No one ever has. I would stay
here forever just for that dick. He
wanted me to say he owns me. I
of course I hesitate. I need to
stop. I don't want to, but its in
my nature.
I KNOW BABY, YOU ARE ALMOST THERE.
také sťat gilotinou.

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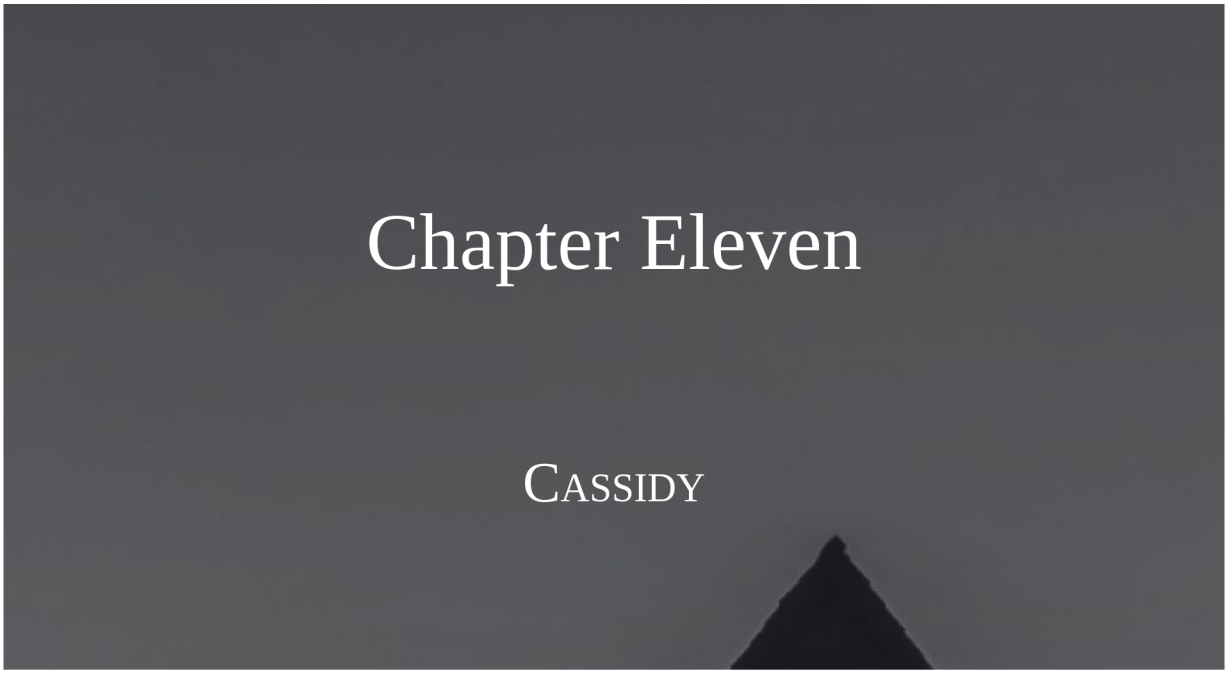

Chapter Eleven

CASSIDY

MY BODY IS SCREAMING for mercy, aches springing up in my bones, my joints and my muscles.

He didn't even fuck me *that* hard for everything to be hurting the way it is, but maybe that's just a marker that I'm getting older. Or maybe it's from all the damn hiking Noah keeps forcing me to do. My thirty-fifth birthday is coming up soon and I'm feeling way too old for this shit.

Sighing, I force my legs off the side of the bed and onto the cold floor. Noah isn't beside me, and he isn't in the shower. In fact, the whole cabin is silent. Stretching, I bend down and touch my toes, trying to ease the tightness that settled over my muscles in my sleep.

God, I must have slept for almost thirteen hours.

Somehow, I still want more.

Heaving myself off the bed, I rummage through the drawers, picking out some sweat pants and a plain white t-shirt. Shower time and then I'll go look for my sexy captor.

I need to keep some boundaries in place, but Christ, it's hard not being able to turn over in bed and find his body there. It's hard knowing he's spent the last few hours doing God knows what while I was dead to the world.

After a quick shower, I throw my hair into a bun and take slow steps out of the bathroom and into the kitchen, my knees cracking and popping as I walk. Seriously, how old am I again?

There's a steaming mug on the counter with a note beside it.

Out getting supplies. Be back soon.

—N

He draws his letters like a serial killer might. Perfect print, no real slant or style. Nothing unique about it at first glance, but when you look closer you see all the precision that goes into making something so ordinary. My heart flutters in my chest—a feeling I'm not sure I like—and I pick up the coffee and take a sip.

It's creamy, just the way I like it.

I linger by the window, gazing out into the misty trees, wondering if he's set up cameras there too. If he can see me through their thick trunks right now, smiling at nothing and trying to convince myself I don't care about him nearly as much as I do.

The more we have our intense fuck sessions—and really, there is no other word for them—the less control I have over myself and my emotions. The more time passes, the less getting away from this place feels like something I want.

This should scare me more than it does.

I thought three days would be enough time to figure out an escape plan, to figure out how to get away from here.

From *him.*

But he’s gone now, and I could run, but I don’t. I’m still wrestling with myself about it all. He’s everything I ever wanted. Everything I dreamed out. I think I even made a whole journal entry about how much I want everything he offers.

So, what’s stopping me from just falling into it? From letting go and falling in love with him?

Maybe it’s the fact that I feel dirty. I feel like I should want someone like Stuart, who is calm, predictable, even though he cheated on me, he was normal.

Noah is anything but normal. He’s forced a crack in my psyche that’s become a chasm, allowing those thoughts that keep my pussy throbbing to be on the forefront of my mind every damn day. He makes me want him. He makes me want to kick and scream and bite and hit. He makes me want to run until he can tie me up and punish me, leaving beautiful bruises down my skin.

I crave the loss of control, the unrelenting need that rises up when he’s around. I crave his cock like a woman who is parched from being trapped in the desert.

At this point, I realize, it’s become more of a game for me.

This push and pull. I *need* to fight against the hold he has on me, because if I give in, that means I’m just as sick and deranged as I feared I was.

And *that* is a hard pill to swallow.

My lungs contract as I exhale a long breath and take a sip of my coffee. It’s luke warm now, but still good enough to drink.

The front door creaks and in steps Noah, carrying a grocery bag.

“Sorry I wasn’t here when you woke. Ran out of coffee and decided to stop at the lodge to grab some.” He eyes me carefully. “I had an idea for today.”

“Mmmm, and what’s that? More hiking? Because honestly, I don’t think my knees will keep if I have to do much more.”

He gives me a grin that makes my insides melt. “I was thinking about something more relaxing. Maybe breakfast in the main lodge.”

My heart skips a beat, and I hate myself for liking the idea.

“Breakfast at the lodge? You mean in public?”

Noah sets the bag down and nods. “You’re still a guest, so it’s expected that at some point you’ll show up.” He pauses, studying my reaction. “What do you say? It’ll be good to remind them that you’re safe. Just enjoying your time to relax.”

I’m chewing the inside of my cheek, weighing the risks versus the thrill of it all. He’s confident that I won’t do anything rash—too confident—but that’s nothing new.

“If I go, will you promise not to take out all the staff if I say hello?” I try to keep my tone light, give him a teasing smile. Deep down, I am not sure how much of it is a joke.

“If you behave, no one gets hurt,” he says with a playful wink, but there’s an edge to it that reminds me exactly who he is.

“And what if I don’t behave?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Then you might see a side of me you haven’t yet.” His voice is low, dangerous, yet it sends an involuntary shiver of excitement through me.

My head spins as I consider what he’s saying—that there’s more to him than the stalkerish control freak he’s shown me so far. That I might have only scratched his surface.

“Alright,” I say before I can talk myself out of it. “Let’s go to breakfast.”

He grins and steps closer, brushing a strand of hair from my face. The touch is casual, intimate, like he’s done it a million times.

“Glad you’re on board,” he says, eyes boring into mine with that mix of affection and ownership that makes me want to slap him and kiss him at the same time.

We get ready fast. I’m so excited to be around other people. I change into clothes more suitable for being seen in public and toss my hair into something that looks less like I just rolled out of bed. *Note to self: bring brush, toiletries and other personal items.* Noah watches me with amusement as I fuss with my appearance, his confidence both infuriating and strangely reassuring.

“Hardly recognize you,” he teases when I finally emerge from the bathroom, looking more like the old Cassidy than I have in days.

“This is who I am,” I shoot back, feeling an unexpected thrill at being myself again, even if it’s just for a morning.

Together, we start the hike down to the main lodge. It’s cold as hell, but Noah has lent me one of his jackets—it smells like him, rugged and musky—and we make good time on the trail. My body protests every step of the way; muscles are tight, lungs burning in the crisp air. He keeps pace with me easily as if sensing exactly how much I can handle.

By the time we’re approaching the lodge, my breath is visible in small clouds in front of me and my heart is banging against my ribcage—not just from exertion but from knowing this could be my chance to scream out for help. To let someone know what’s happening here.

I can get away.

He stops just short of the lodge door and leans in close, his lips brushing my cheek as he whispers, “No funny business, Cassidy. I mean it. If I have to kill every single person in this resort because you did something foolish, I will.”

His threat is soft, almost loving, like it’s a promise instead of a warning. My pulse spikes as I force myself to nod—every instinct screaming at me to test him, to see just how far he’ll go.

“No funny business,” I echo, my voice steadier than I feel.

He pulls back and gives me a grin like we’re partners in crime. It does nothing to calm the storm inside me.

The lodge is quiet when we enter; most guests are still in their cabins or out on the trails. A fire crackles in the massive stone hearth, chasing the chill from my bones.

Noah puts a possessive hand on my lower back, guiding me toward the dining area. The few people who are there look up with mild curiosity as we pass. I recognize one of them—Dottie, I think—with her red curls and loud laugh that carries across the room. My heart leaps into my throat.

“Oh wow, I thought you left!” she calls out, waving frantically to get my attention. “Oh my god, where have you been for the last few days!”

Noah’s grip tightens ever so slightly, and I know he won’t think twice about following through with his threat if I push things too far.

“Found a cabin to hole up in,” I say with as much casual cheer as I can muster. “Got swept away by all this nature.”

Dottie eyes Noah with open curiosity, taking in his rugged good looks and the way he’s practically glued to my side. “And who’s this?”

I hesitate for half a second too long.

“Noah,” he says. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of leading you on a hike, but perhaps later in the week.”

I want to stay and talk, but he drags me to the coffee station and starts pouring our cups.

“Would you mind dishing up some breakfast. Today is buffet day, so whatever you’d like. I will be at our usual table.” He takes the coffee cups and walks to our table.

I’m standing in front of the buffet, alone. I can run. I can scream. I can do literally *anything* other than what I’m doing, which is dishing up spoonsful of egg and strips of bacon.

I should make a break for it. Noah isn’t even watching me; he’s talking to some members of the staff, his back turned just enough that I could disappear before he notices I’m gone.

But what then? I’d be halfway down the road in this fucking cold, and he’d catch me. He always catches me. Wouldn’t be able to make it very far without him.

The thrill of freedom flares up only to flicker out as I replay his threat over in my mind—how he’d kill everyone here if I even thought about running.

Maybe if I found Dana, I could give her a little red flag, like women do in those videos when they’re begging for help. Blink twice or something. Looking around, she is noticeably absent.

Probably sick. I would be too if I had to put up with Noah’s shit all the time.

I grab our plates and head toward where Noah is now sitting at a table near the window, his eyes tracking every step I take. There’s something dangerous in the way he watches me—a mix of amusement and possessive pride.

“See?” he says as I sit across from him, setting the plates down with more force than necessary. “This wasn’t so hard.”

I glare at him, my frustration bubbling just beneath the surface. “Maybe not for you.” I stab into my eggs while holding his eye contact, trying to keep the serious grimace on my face as he eyes me with a smirk.

“Pretending that’s me?”

“Yes.” I say before changing the subject. “Haven’t seen Dana around.”

“I thought we moved past the games, Cassidy. Or is it just when I’m impaling you with my cock that you’re compliant and want to be with me?”

I don’t miss the way he ignores my question about Dana, but my face heats at his suggestion all the same. “No. Now that I’m back in ‘civilization’, I decided I’d like to stay. But somehow, I get the feeling you’d never let that happen.”

“Actually,” he says, his face thoughtful as he chews his bacon. “Dana moved on, and now I’m missing a receptionist. If you can behave like a good girl, there might be a job up here for you.”

What does he mean he’s missing a receptionist? He’s just the hiking guide… Wait, isn’t Dana the receptionist?

“Is that so,” I say, wary of his nonchalance.

The dining room starts filling up, guests drifting in to get their coffee and breakfast. He doesn’t take his eyes off me, and I can feel the weight of them like a tether holding me in place. It’s infuriating and reassuring all at once.

“You can’t just keep me here forever,” I tell him under my breath.

Noah leans forward, his voice low but full of intent. “I can—and I will. Anyway, Cassidy, think it over. You might find working out here in the fresh air is just what you need.”

I bite back a groan. No, it’s not. I need to get back to my practice before those bozo’s destroy everything I’ve worked for. Now that I’m out of the cabin, the spell has broken. I need to be around people. *Other* people. *Sane* people. “I need to go to my cabin to get some of my essentials.”

He nods, “Sure, I’ll take you there when we’re done.”

The plan forms in my head as we eat. When we get there, I can claim I need to email Carter and Stuart about a file, that I absolutely need to check my phone and send a quick email before I get him to take me back up the trail.

He won't want to put me on edge by dragging me out right away; he'll let me have this little piece of independence to keep up the illusion that I've got some say in all this.

It's the best shot I have, but adrenaline spikes through me at the thought of it going wrong. He'll make good on his promise if I fuck this up, and I don't know if I could live with that.

"Ready?" His voice snaps me back into the moment, and he looks at my empty plate with satisfaction.

"Yeah," I say, trying to sound casual. "Let's go."

We leave through the same door we came in from, and it takes all my willpower not to glance back over my shoulder. The cold air hits me like a shock, but it helps clear my head. His hand finds its way to my lower back again as we cut through the trees toward my cabin.

I'll have less time than I hoped for once we get there; if he even senses something is off… But it only needs to be a few seconds. Just enough to send an SOS.

"So," Noah says as we approach the cabin. "What essentials do you need?"

I force a laugh, trying not to sound too eager. "Oh, need to grab some clothes, toiletries. You know. Woman things. That time of the month is coming up."

He nods and opens my door, allowing me in first.

"If you don't mind, I'd like a bit of privacy to gather my things." My voice comes out small, but he just shrugs and sits on the couch.

I beeline for my room and fling open the drawer, grabbing my phone. Five percent battery. It's enough.

As I'm opening the screen and clicking on contacts, I release a small scream when I see it's blank. Pages of contacts, gone. I thumb to my email. Deleted.

Oh God… flicking over to my socials, they're also gone, the app blocked from access.

Oh shit… shit, shit, shit. This is bad. Way worse than I thought. Groaning, I throw the phone at the wall. How the fuck had he done this? I figured because he was still nice, didn't rape me, didn't force me into anything like that, he could be reasoned with. He could be reasonable.

But nothing about this is reasonable. I muffle another scream as a creak from behind me makes me jump.

"Finding everything okay?" He says, leaning against the door, his arms crossed as he tracks my phone on the floor.

"What the fuck did you do, Noah?"

He shrugs, picking up my phone and sliding it into his pocket. "Made things easier for you."

My heart hammers in my chest. I sit hard on the edge of the bed, forcing myself to breathe through panic. No contacts. No email. It's like I've disappeared off the planet. "You've ruined everything."

"No," he says, moving closer with that calm, relentless certainty. "I've cleared the way for what's next."

I glare at him, defiance rising to replace my fear. "You think if you cut me off from everyone, I'll just give up and be your little mountain wife? You're insane."

“You knew that already.” He sits beside me, dangerously close, like a wolf daring me to bolt.

I stand and turn away from him, trying to think through the shock of this new betrayal. Hobbling together some semblance of a plan is impossible now, and he knows it. He’s watching as I struggle to regain composure.

“We should collect your things and get going,” he says lightly, as if this is all part of some grand adventure we’re taking together. “If you’d like to discuss the receptionist position, we can. But you have gravely disappointed me, Cassidy.”

He’s fucking delusional! Offering me a job! I *have* a job! I’m a goddamn lawyer and a very good one! What the actual fuck?

Everything in me wants to scream or cry or fight back with words that will hit him as hard as he’s hit me with this stunt. Instead, I grab a duffle bag from the closet and start shoving clothes into it.

“What?” I ask bitterly without turning around. “No cuffs or rope?”

“That depends,” he says softly. “Are you going to make me use them?”

I hate him for being so calm about this. Hate how much control he has over the situation—and over me. But more than anything, I hate how this level of obsession intrigues me.

He’s shown me more passion in the last few days than anyone has in a lifetime. But I just can’t seem to drop the last shred of my old life, not enough to fully embrace giving it all away for a man I hardly know. It’s a constant battle. Like a little devil on one shoulder and the little angel on another.

“I might like it if you do,” I shoot back.

There’s a flash of something dark and hungry in his eyes, gone almost too fast to catch. “If you ask nicely.”

I stare at him, daring him to break this tense standoff. We're locked in a silent battle of wills, and my defiance only makes him want me more judging by the way his chest is rapidly rising and falling.

"Maybe later," he says with a smile. "For now, let's get back before the weather turns."

I stuff the last of my things into the bag and zip it up with more force than necessary. My anger is a wild animal beneath the surface, but he doesn't seem worried. If anything, he thrives on it.

Noah stands and reaches for my arm, pulling me toward the door with firm but gentle insistence. "We can try this again when you decide to do as you're told," he tells me as we step outside.

I grit my teeth against the anger bubbling in my chest. "That'll be when hell freezes over."

"Suit yourself."

The walk up is slow, both of us silent as the trail winds through towering pines and patches of lingering mist. I'm exhausted from fighting him, fighting myself. Each step is heavy with resignation and a grudging acceptance that this is my life now.

We reach the cabin, its presence both comforting and foreign as Noah opens the door to let me in first. The fire crackles in the corner, warming everything except my stubborn pride.

He closes the door behind us and turns to face me, his expression softer than I expect after what just happened. Like he understands how close I am to breaking—or breaking free.

"Talk to me, Cassidy. I'm confused. I tick every single one of your boxes, and yet you act like I'm a monster."

“You ARE a monster, Noah! You chopped my ex’s dick off and gave it to me as a present! Just because you’re amazing in bed, doesn’t make up for the fact that you practically kidnapped me, and now I come to find out that you’ve erased my entire life!” I walk up to him, fists clenched as I lash out. The first hit is against his chest, hot tears building in the corner of my eyes as the second comes down.

Soon, I’m beating against his chest, and he just stands there, taking it.

Like he’s my punching bag. Like he wants me to get this out of my system so I will fall even more into his fucked-up way of loving me.

“I don’t want your fucking job,” I scream, my fists banging against muscle and bone and the infuriating calm with which he’s handling this. “I want my life back! My real life!”

He’s silent, letting me exhaust myself against him until my hands slow and my breathing is ragged.

“Are you done?” His voice is gentle, maddeningly so.

And the tears spill over, frustration mingling with the dangerous thrill of being trapped in his gravity. There’s no escape; we both know it.

“No,” I whisper, but it’s a lie. I slump against him, tired of fighting when it gets me nowhere. His arms circle around me and he rubs soothing circles into my back.

“Yes,” he murmurs into my hair, holding me tight as the fight drains out of me. “You are.”

We stand there for what feels like eternity as I let myself lean into his hold. My breath evens out and the anger turns into something else—something closer to acceptance than I want to admit. It’s terrifying how quickly I slip back into needing him after everything he’s done.

“Good girl,” he says softly, stroking my back until the storm inside me calms to a dull roar.

I should hate how much those words make me melt, but all I feel is relief at being wrapped in him so completely.

He picks me up and carries me to the bed, laying me down and kissing my forehead.

“Sleep now, Cassidy. I have something to do and when I’m done, it’s just you and me.”

I’m too tired for a retort, watching through slitted eyelids as he quietly leaves the room.

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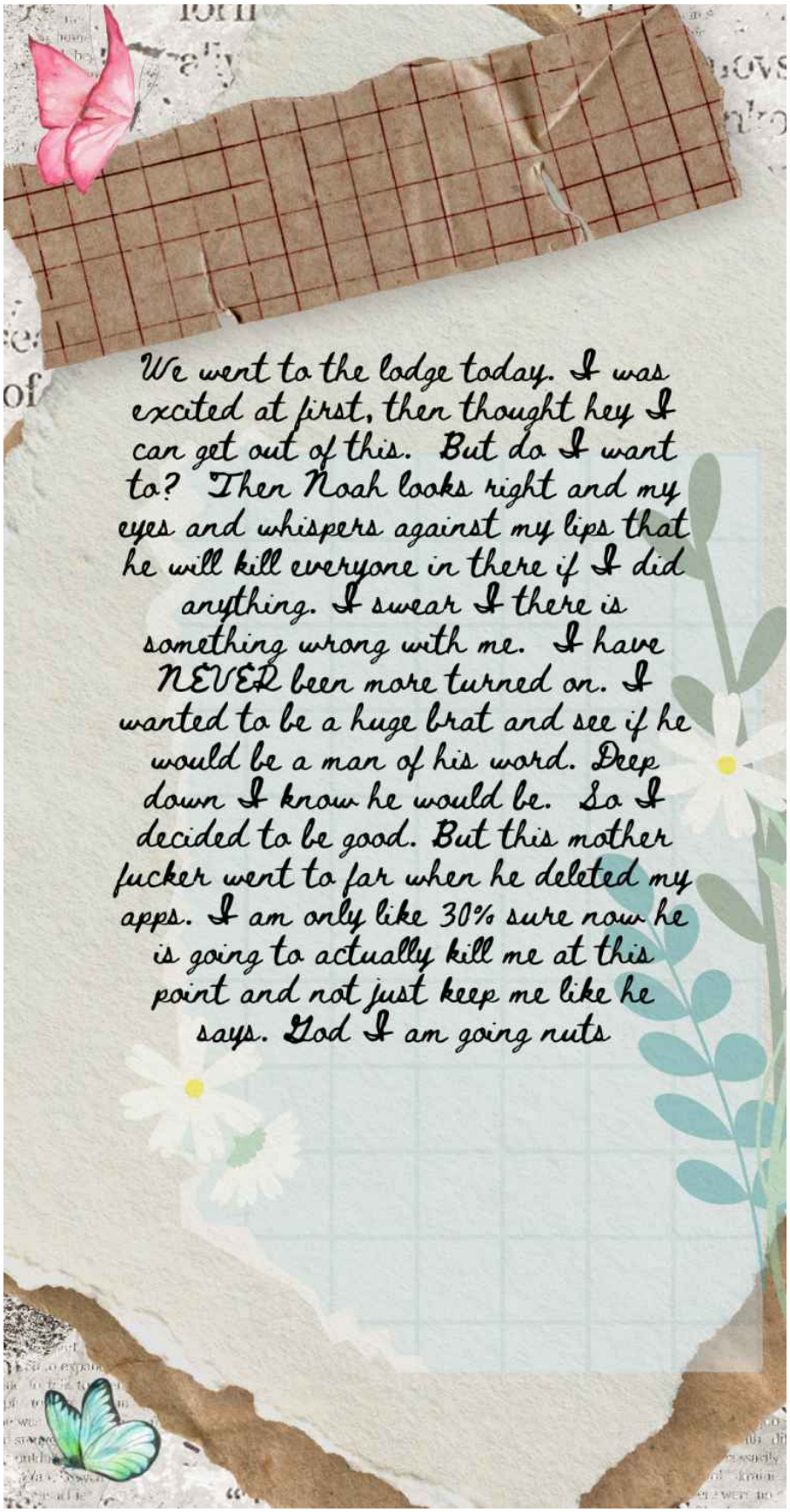
We went to the lodge today. I was excited at first, then thought hey I can get out of this. But do I want to? Then Noah looks right and my eyes and whispers against my lips that he will kill everyone in there if I did anything. I swear I there is something wrong with me. I have NEVER been more turned on. I wanted to be a huge brat and see if he would be a man of his word. Deep down I know he would be. So I decided to be good. But this mother fucker went to far when he deleted my apps. I am only like 30% sure now he is going to actually kill me at this point and not just keep me like he says. God I am going nuts

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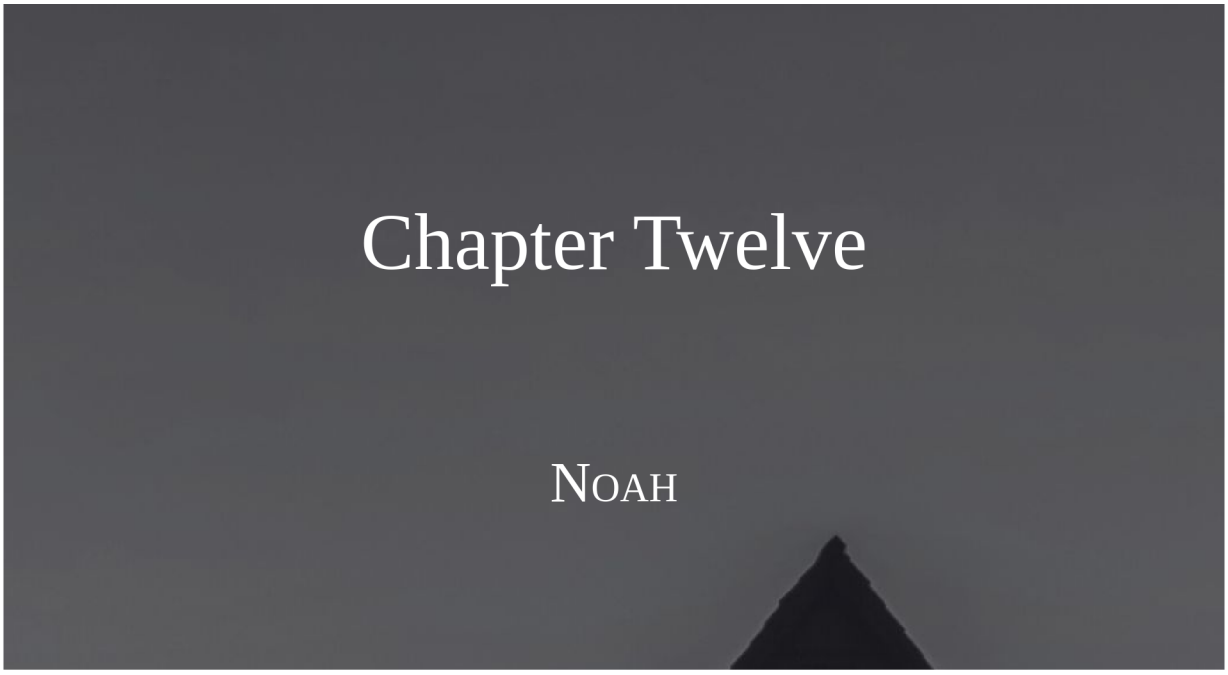

Chapter Twelve

Noah

WELL, THAT WENT ABOUT as well as expected.

Better, almost.

At least she didn’t scream and draw attention to herself. I suppose it’s natural to feel some kind of way about stripping the old parts of yourself and rebuilding everything you’ve ever known. Choosing a different path. I grab my pack, stuffing my mask in it.

I can’t relate. I’ve never wanted anything other than this life. So that’s what I built.

But she… she built a life in the city, and I’ve taken that from her. Some kickback is expected, but I am growing tired of her childish outbursts. Deep down she wants everything I have to offer, and she craves me, just as I crave her.

We are meant to be, she just needs to drop the fucking act.

My cell buzzes in my pocket as I start up the trail towards the hunting cabin. Pulling it out, I can see Kairo’s name flashing against the screen.

“What?” I spit into the speaker.

“I need the cabin. Like in two days. So, if you’re not done, we will be sharing it. I found her, Noah. I found my girl.”

I roll my eyes. *Sure. Like the last one you found. The very same one you professed your undying love to, only to find out that she let the football team shove their cocks up her ass, so she was unclean and unworthy of your affections. Stupid little boy.*

“Noah. Did you hear me?” His voice is maniacal. Excitement tinged with madness.

“I’ll be done in two days. I’m moving Cassidy to the cabin I built for her soon. Then it’s all yours. Oh, and Kairo. Clean the fucking hunting cabin next time you use it. It’s repugnant.”

“It’s supposed to be repugnant.” He sounds petulant, like a child I gave a talking to. “I’ll see you soon. Save me some of the ass you’re hoarding.”

Not a chance you fucking nut.

He laughs before the line goes dead and I shove my phone back into my pocket.

I detest this about him. About how he can think he loves someone, then discard them like they never existed. Women are his playthings. They always have been.

Kairo gets *obsessive* and then he hunts his target. Once he finds out she has one little flaw, he gets rid of her. Doesn’t usually kill them, but accidents have happened. Similar ones to Alannah. The trails are treacherous if you don’t know where you’re going. I’ve seen it time and again.

I don’t do anything to stop it, because that’s his life, but to say it doesn’t grate on me is a lie. It does. Cassidy is beautiful. She also has flaws, but those can be eradicated with enough patience and persuasion.

It’s not about finding the perfect woman; it’s about molding a woman into perfection.

And that’s what my idiot cousin hasn’t yet realized.

That and he picks the bottom barrel women. Ones that I can tell just aren’t the caliber he needs to truly thrive in his darkness.

Cassidy is nothing like the women he brings here. And I know if he laid an eye on her, he would want her too. But he can’t have her. She’s mine. Once he tried to share a catch with me and I vomited on his Gucci’s. No fucking thank you. The women he trials aren’t worth a single moment of my time and he knows that if he ever touched Cass, if he even so much as breathed the same air as her…

I would carve out his intestines and strangle him with them.

It’s not an empty threat and he knows it. He thinks I’m the soft one, but those roles would reverse if anyone laid a finger on what’s mine.

The hunting cabin comes into view, and I slow my pace as Dana’s shrill voice pierces the air. “Noah! Get back here! You fucking prick! We are going to die!”

Can only hope.

I take my time covering the last few feet until I’m standing just outside the door, letting her screams bounce off the walls until she’s hoarse and desperate.

Finally, I push the door open and step inside. Stopping only to pull my mask over my face, I head right back to the hanging room.

Dana's eyes widen when she sees me, a mix of rage and relief flooding her face. She thrashes against her bindings, trying to kick out at me as I approach. “What the fuck is on your face? Ugh, you know what, I don’t fucking care. I knew you’d come back! Let us down, you fucking psycho!”

I chuckle low in my throat, walking past her to where Mike is hanging limp and unconscious. He's got a sheen of sweat over his face, and he's pale. Probably lack of water. He stinks too. Like he shit himself. I'll dispatch him first and get rid of the smell before working on Dana. "You're lucky I'm in a good mood."

She spits at me, but it's weak. "You don't look like you're in a good mood."

"I am," I say, grabbing the rope holding Mike up and loosening it just enough for him to slump to the floor. "Cassidy's finally coming around."

"Fuck you," she hisses.

"Yeah," I reply, letting the words hang as I move over to her ropes. Her face is red and swollen from hanging so long and probably from all the yelling.

My hunting knife is sticking out of my pack, so I grab it and stand over Mike's body.

"You still don't get it," she says through gritted teeth. "This won't work out for you."

"I think it will." I grab the knife and plunge it into his chest. His eyes flicker, but he doesn't fight as I yank it out, bits of flesh sticking in the serrated edges. Blood sprays in an arc against the wall, the warmth splashing against my skin as I bring the knife down again.

Squelch.

"What the fuck, Noah?"

It's like Dana just registered what I am doing here. "Yes?"

"What… why… what the fuck?" She repeats.

"You said that already." I point out as I open the back door and drag Mike's body outside.

A trail of blood follows as I pull him the few feet up the rest of the cliff and towards the edge. The ocean roars down below, sending up sky high sprays

of salty water.

The salt air stings as I kick him over the side, his body spinning before landing with a dull thud on the jagged rocks below. Waves crash against him, shoving him against the rocks like a limp rag doll. Soon he will become one with the fish.

I turn back to the cabin, wiping the blood off my hands and onto my pants.

Dana’s wails float through the woods as I rinse off in a small puddle. Picking up a stone, I scrub at my arms where Mike's blood has begun to dry into sticky patches. I don’t particularly care about blood, but when it dries it’s irritating as fuck to wash off. By the time I'm clean enough, Dana's voice has grown hoarse.

Back in the cabin, I find her struggling against her ropes, her eyes wild with panic. “Noah! Please! Don’t do this!”

I say nothing as I grab another piece of rope and wrap it around her ankles for good measure.

“You’re going to kill me,” she says, desperation creeping into her voice.

“Yes.”

“But why? We were good together!” Her tone shifts from pleading to accusing. “You used me! You lied to me!”

I ignore her and check the knots one last time.

“She’ll leave you,” Dana spits as I drag her toward the back door. “She’ll leave you like everyone else.”

“By everyone else, you mean who?”

She writhes in terror as I hoist her out of the cabin and onto the ground outside. “Please! Noah!”

I haul her up to the cliff edge, taking my time as she kicks uselessly against my grip. “We could have been perfect together,” she sobs. “Cassidy will

never love you like I do.”

“True. She will love me the way I want to be loved.” I pause, looking at Mike’s body slowly being dragged away.

This is too easy of a death for Dana.

I turn and head back to the cabin. Something about what she said grates on my nerves, and I decide I’m going to bleed her out like a pig.

Back in the hanging room, I drop her on the ground, grabbing her feet and lifting her. A grunt escapes me as she tries to kick out. Leaning down, I bend my knees and hoist her ankle ropes onto the hook.

She screams as blood rushes into her head. Beautiful.

Grabbing a blood bucket, I put it under her head as she thrashes and writhes. Begging for mercy. Apologizing over and over.

I hardly hear her as I turn and grab my knife.

“I’m sorry it came to this Dana,” I say, not really sorry at all. “But I just can’t have you risking everything I’ve built here. All of this,” I motion with my knife around us, “is for a good cause. Carefully curated over years of hard work and patience. Cassidy… she’s the one I’ve been waiting for, and you are putting all of it in jeopardy. So…”

I shrug, bending down and knicking her jugular, her eyes going wide as she screams, blood trickling down her face.

“Please, Dana. Stop moving so much. The bucket is there for a reason and you’re making a mess.”

Before I can make the second cut, the door to the cabin swings open and a piercing scream rings out.

Fuck… oh fuck.

I turn slowly and put down the knife. Cassidy stands there, chest heaving as she takes in the sight before her.

I’m sure I look like some grim reaper with my mask on and blood splattered all over me, but she’s looking at me like I crawled out of hell.

“Oh my God…” She stares before looking beyond me and at Dana, gurgling as the *plink* of her blood fills the bucket.

I step towards her, “It’s not what it looks like.”

Her hand flies to her mouth, and she shakes her head, taking a step back. “You’re… you’re…”

“Cassidy,” I say gently, holding out a hand like I’m coaxing a wounded animal. “I can explain.”

“You’re fucking insane!” She turns and bolts, her footsteps frantic on the wood as she dashed out the cabin.

My pulse spikes. This wasn’t supposed to happen. *FUCK.*

I tear off after her, blood and adrenaline pounding in my ears. She’s fast for someone who said their knees were shot. I grit my teeth and push harder; if she makes it too far down the trail, we’ll have a real problem. I don’t even have the rain on my side this time.

“Cassidy!” I yell as I gain ground. “Come back!”

“Go to hell!” Her voice is raw, desperate.

The wind howls between us, making it hard to hear anything except the wild thud of my heart as I close the gap. She’s not running where I thought she would; instead of heading for the main lodge, she veers off toward a narrow path leading to the falls.

Clever girl. She must have noticed the cabin and not said anything, thinking it was someone’s house.

She doesn’t know these trails like I do. It’s only a matter of time before she hits rough terrain and has to slow down. Or worse—before she trips and—

A small scream echoes through the trees as Cassidy stumbles on loose rock, falling hard before scrambling up again.

I'm almost on top of her now, can see the panic etched on her face as she glances back and sees me closing in. My heart lurches at the fear in her eyes, but there's no time for that now.

Surging forward, I tackle her with just enough force to take us both to the ground without breaking anything important.

She fights like a wildcat, thrashing and clawing at me as I pin her down. "Let go! Let go of me!" Her voice is shrill, terror mixed with fury.

"Shhh, Cassidy," I breathe, trying to calm her without loosening my grip. She's strong with all that adrenaline coursing through her, but I'm stronger. "Just listen."

"I hate you!" She jerks beneath me, trying to throw me off.

"No, you don't," I say, forcing the words out calmly while she writhes under me. "You're scared. This isn't—"

"Not what it looks like?" she spits. "You're fucking deranged!"

"Listen," I say again, this time letting some of my own frustration bleed into the word. "If you run now, you won't get far."

Her eyes blaze up at me in defiance. "I don't care! If you're going to kill me, just do it!"

The accusation stabs deeper than I expect, and I release one of her arms to cup her face with my hand. Her skin is cold as ice; even in panic she's freezing.

"I'm not going to kill you," I say fiercely. "I love you."

"You can't love anyone!" Her voice is raw and broken now.

I let out a long breath, holding her gaze with everything I have left in me. "Then why are you still alive?"

Confusion flickers through the rage on her face, “Let me go, Noah! You… you killed her!” Her voice breaks as she bucks her hips upward, slamming into my cock and making me keel over.

She takes that split second to roll from under me and take off again, towards the cabin I built for her.

I’m up and after her again, the rain starting to pour down. It’s a slight advantage, but not enough to slow her. She’s got more fight than anyone I’ve ever brought here, but she doesn’t understand. Doesn’t get the depths of my love for her.

“Cassidy!” The name rips out of me.

She doesn’t look back this time, just barrels forward with single-minded determination. The path narrows and I gain on her, my breath coming fast and ragged. She thinks she can outsmart me, but she doesn’t know how deeply I’ve planned this.

“I’ll hunt you,” I shout as she slips around the side of the cabin and the door creaks open. “You know I will.”

Her response is a strangled cry as she slams the door behind her. My hands are on it before the sound finishes echoing in the trees, rattling the frame with violent force.

“Leave me alone!” Her desperate voice through the wood is both a plea and a challenge.

“Never.” I throw my weight against it, once, twice—a third time until it bursts open in a shower of splintered wood.

Damn, I made that solid.

The cabin is huge, beautiful in its design, with an open floor plan and three bedrooms upstairs. Giant windows overlook the falls and the meadow, with a big sunroof to let in the light. This wasn’t how I wanted to show her my

craftsmanship, but we're here now. She stands there, chest heaving with exertion and panic as she holds a piece of broken wood like a weapon.

I stop just inside the doorway, watching her every move with feral intensity. Water drips from my hair and clothes, pooling at my feet as we face each other.

"Get away from me." Her voice shakes as her grip on the wood tightens.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Cassidy." I step closer, holding my hands up, trying to show her I'm not a threat.

"Get… the… FUCK… away." She swings the wood the closer to her I walk.

"You're overreacting. If you just let me explain—"

"EXPLAIN? You're… you're… bleeding her out like a fucking animal!"

I should have just shoved her over the fucking cliff.

Sighing, I step into her reach as she swings, my hand coming out to grab the wood and wrenching it from her grip, throwing it across the cabin with a loud bang. "Yes. I am bleeding her out like a pig. She deserves it. She found us and I can't have anyone take you away from me. Cassidy… she was a bad person. Obsessed with me."

She scoffs, trying to peer into the hearts around my eyes, "Obsessed with you? Like you're obsessed with me?! How the fuck is it any different! Should I kill you? Huh, Noah? Is that what I should do? You killed her to make it stop, so I should kill you!"

"That's different, minx. I belong to you, as you belong to me." I grab her waist, pinning her arms down at her sides. "Stop fighting me. I'm on your side. I'd never hurt you."

"You're hurting me now!" She screams, tears pouring down her face as I squeeze her tighter.

“Stop fighting me,” I demand. “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

Her eyes are wild, cornered-animal desperate. “I don’t want you! I don’t want any of this!”

“You don’t know what you want.” My voice is steady, but it comes out strained as she struggles against me. “You will. I promise.”

We’re locked in a standoff, both of us running out of steam to continue this fight.

“You’ll never be free of me,” I say softly. “So stop running.”

She collapses against my chest, shaking with sobs that sound like they’re tearing her apart. She’s exhausted, too broken to fight back anymore.

“Please,” she whispers, so low I can barely hear it over the roar of the rain outside. “Please just let me go.”

I hold her tighter instead of answering, cradling her like something precious and fragile that might shatter at any moment.

The storm outside is nothing compared to the one raging between us. But deep down, I know it’s only a matter of time before she sees things my way.

Cassidy goes limp in my arms as defeat settles over her like a heavy fog. I guide her to the floor, sitting with my back against the wall and pulling her onto my lap.

She’s drowning in despair, but she’s not alone.

“I can wait,” I whisper into her damp hair.

And I will.

For as long as it takes.

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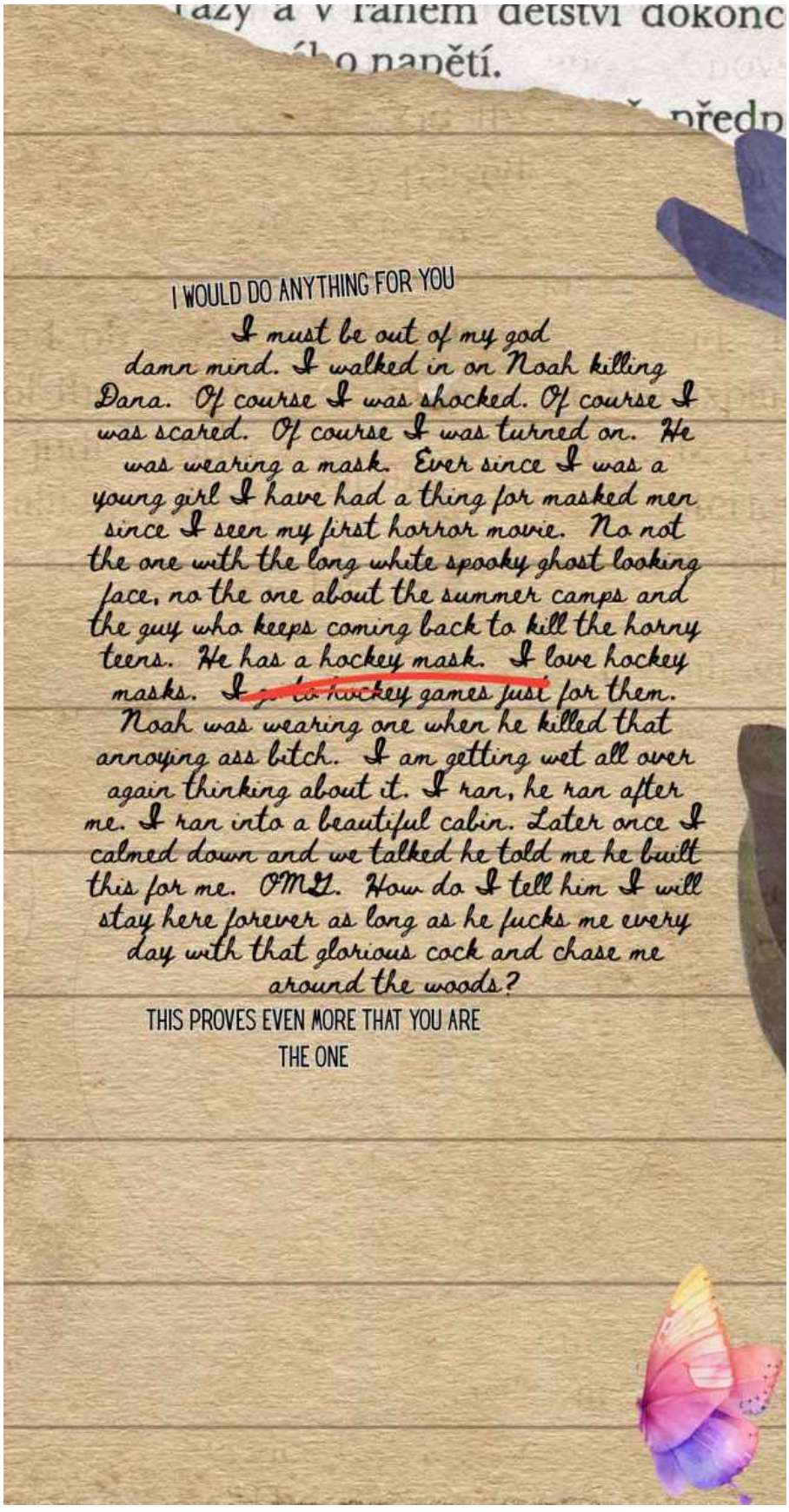
I WOULD DO ANYTHING FOR YOU
I must be out of my god damn mind. I walked in on Noah killing Dana. Of course I was shocked. Of course I was scared. Of course I was turned on. He was wearing a mask. Ever since I was a young girl I have had a thing for masked men since I seen my first horror movie. No not the one with the long white spooky ghost looking face, no the one about the summer camps and the guy who keeps coming back to kill the horny teens. He has a hockey mask. I love hockey masks. I go to hockey games just for them. Noah was wearing one when he killed that annoying ass bitch. I am getting wet all over again thinking about it. I ran, he ran after me. I ran into a beautiful cabin. Later once I calmed down and we talked he told me he built this for me. OMG. How do I tell him I will stay here forever as long as he fucks me every day with that glorious cock and chase me around the woods?
THIS PROVES EVEN MORE THAT YOU ARE THE ONE

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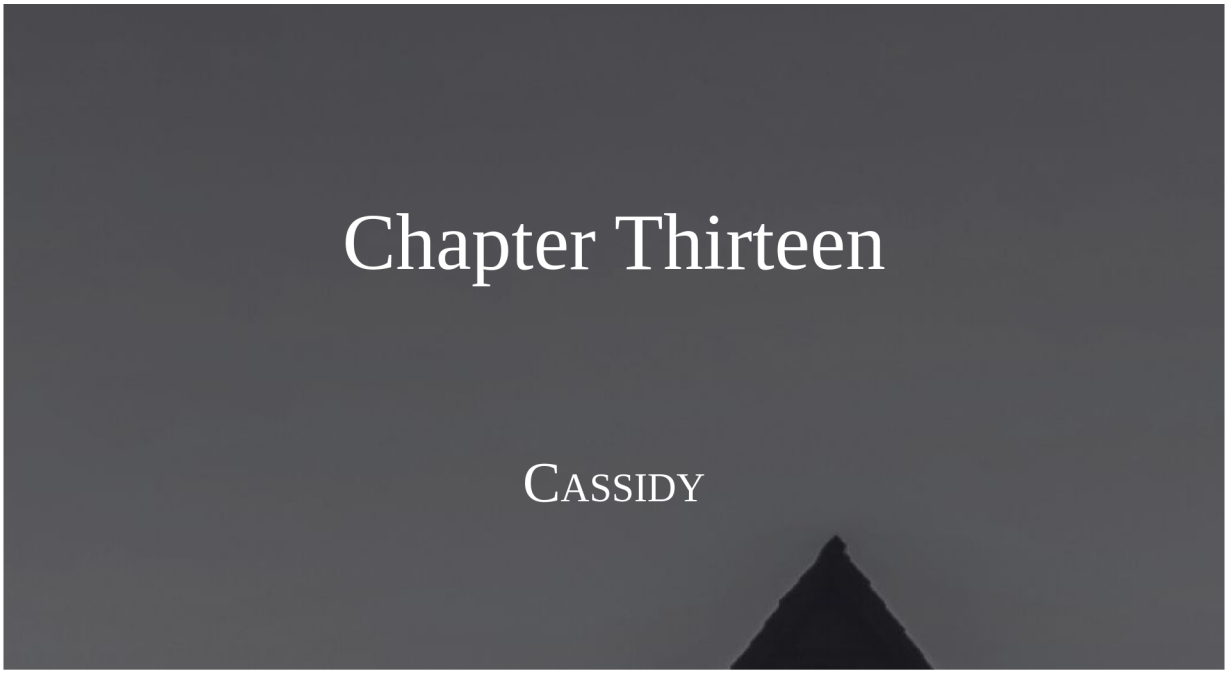

Chapter Thirteen

CASSIDY

HE KILLED HER. HE killed Dana like she was nothing. Like she meant nothing. Bled her out into a metal bucket as she grew weaker and weaker. He's a monster. A fucking demon.

My thoughts don't slow, even as I allow him to hold me and whisper his love for me, over and over.

What if I didn't fight anymore? What if I just stayed and allowed myself to become what he wants me to be? What if I fail whatever image he has of me and he kills me?

Panic rises in my throat, threatening to choke me. I can feel it crawling under my skin. He's said he doesn't want to hurt me, but he will. How long before he tires of me? Before he finds someone else? I thrash again, weak and wild.

"Shhh," Noah soothes, his hands gentle but unyielding as they keep me in place. "It's okay."

"Fuck you," I sob, though there's no strength behind it now.

He holds me tighter, his warmth seeping into my bones until the chill of the rain fades away. “I know you’re scared. But I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Like you didn’t let anything happen to Dana?” My voice is muffled and thick with exhaustion.

He pauses, and I can almost hear him choosing his words carefully. “I never loved Dana. She was a mindless fuck and she became obsessive. I told her as such, and she refused to listen.” He strokes my hair like he did when we were in the cabin and everything felt safe. “She followed us up here and I couldn’t let her destroy what we’ve been building, Cassidy. You have to understand.”

Fear wars with understanding as I fight to regain control of my emotions.

“You say that now that she’d dead and there’s no one to corroborate your story,” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

“I wouldn’t lie to you. To other people, yes. But never to you.” He pulls back enough to look me in the eyes, his eyes dark in the shadows of his mask. “You’re not her simply based on the fact that I love you.”

I can’t hold his gaze. The intensity of it is overwhelming, swallowing every rational thought that tells me to get as far away from him as possible.

“I need to go home, Noah.”

“You know… I built this cabin for us. For you.” He ignores my plea.

Despite myself, I look around, taking in the high ceilings, the windows, the wooden staircase leading upstairs. The kitchen is big, much bigger than the other cabin, and it’s stocked with all the appliances I ever need. No dishwasher, but a high-end coffee machine sits gleaming on the butcher block counters.

“How did you get electricity in here?” I ask, curious.

He shrugs, “I know people who can do impossible things.”

“Like making people who piss you off, disappear?”

He laughs softly, the sound so at odds with everything I just saw that it makes my head spin. “Exactly.”

Part of me wants to be impressed—amazed even—by how far he’s gone to make this place for us. But I can’t shake the image of Dana hanging from that hook, the blood pooling beneath her like some grotesque sacrifice.

“I want to go home,” I say again, my voice gaining strength.

“This is home now.” He murmurs it against my temple.

“Please, Noah.”

“No,” he says gently but firmly. “I can keep you safe here.”

I stop fighting and let my head fall back against his chest, closing my eyes against the tears that threaten to spill over again. Maybe if I play along, if I pretend to be what he wants for a while, he’ll relax enough to slip up and give me another chance at escape.

It’s risky; if he catches on, there’s no telling how far he’ll go this time.

But what other choice do I have?

“Are you going to take off your mask or do you plan on wearing it forever?” My voice is thick with resentment and something that sounds almost like resignation.

He’s silent for a moment before reaching up and pulling it off. It drops to the floor beside us as his fingers find their way back into my hair, stroking softly.

“It’s not forever,” he whispers as I drift into a restless sleep.

But the weight of it feels endless.

I wake with the sun streaming in through the window in the ceiling and clattering in the kitchen. Noah’s shirt is off, and I can’t help but stare at the

muscles bunched in his back. The smell of coffee hits me, jolting any sleep from my mind. I sit, stretching the soreness in my muscles as I slowly peel myself off the floor.

“So… you gonna show me around this place or what?” I say.

He turns, a smile beaming on his face, holding two cups of coffee. “Come, grab your cup and I’ll show you around the place.”

“Is the bedroom as comfortable as the last one?” I ask, taking my mug.

“More,” he promises. “It’s closer to the falls, so you should be able to sleep easier with the sound of nature.”

I’m beginning to wonder if I’ll ever sleep easy again after what I witnessed last night.

He sets his coffee down and grabs my hand. The space feels big and overwhelming, but the way he’s looking at me is soft and eager. We make our way up the stairs, and he opens the first door on the right.

The room is massive, with a king size bed covered in a thick duvet. The windows take up an entire wall, giving us views of both the falls and the field. There are closets and drawers built into every space they can fit without it looking cluttered.

It is beautiful. And terrifying.

He’s thought of everything.

I walk in a daze toward the bed, running my fingers over the fabric like it might disappear if I look away. The room is chilled, but I can’t tell if that’s from me or if he just hasn’t figured out how to keep this ridiculously large space warm yet.

“Well?” He asks.

“It’s…” I search for a word that doesn’t betray how deeply this affects me. “Nice.”

“I see you’re still holding onto that attitude,” Noah says as he leans against the doorframe.

I turn to face him, my expression guarded. “I can’t just pretend like none of this happened.”

“I’m not asking for that.” He sounds almost patient now, but there’s still an edge to his voice that makes me wary. “Come, I’ll show you the other two rooms and the bathrooms.”

We pass through the hallway, and he shows me around the rest of the cabin. The other bedrooms are slightly smaller than ours but just as meticulously crafted. One is set up as an office with a giant desk in the corner.

There’s more space here than I’ll ever need and it only serves to remind me how much of my old life I’ve left behind. How far I am from everything but him.

When we get back to the living room, he pulls me close, holding me against his bare chest. I can feel his heart pounding, echoing the frantic beat of my own. “I meant what I said, Cassidy. It’s going to be just us now. And a baby, sometime in the future. I can easily build a crib for the office room.”

He kisses my forehead, then lifts my chin with his fingers so I have no choice but to meet his eyes. They’re filled with an intensity that borders on frightening.

He loves me; there’s no doubt in my mind about that. But it’s the kind of love you don’t walk away from unscathed.

Tears threaten again, but this time they don’t spill over. Instead, they dry up and leave behind a hollow ache that I try not to dwell on as Noah presses his lips against mine—a soft promise that feels like chains wrapping around my mind.

“Let’s go grab some stuff from the other cabin and then get your things unpacked,” he says when he pulls away.

I nod numbly. “How did you build this place?”

He grabs his shirt and pulls it over his head, “I had some help. One of my cousin’s friends is a major construction contractor and he helped. I started it the day I first saw you.”

I know he means that to be endearing, but right now I’m just creeped out. Yesterday, before… before seeing Dana, it would have given me butterflies, but right now, I’m just… nothing. I feel nothing. His hand finds mine as we head towards the door.

His grip tightens as he pulls me closer, and I let him. There’s no fight left—not now, not yet—even though every nerve is screaming at me to do something other than follow him back down the trail.

Once we get back to the small cabin, I grab my journals out of my bag and sit at the table. Noah pauses to watch me for a moment before smiling that infuriating smile.

“Good girl. Write out all your feelings.”

I snort. “Yeah, so you can just invade my privacy and read them later.”

“There’s no secrets between lovers, Cassidy, you should know that by now.”

He turns and heads to the room to pack.

It’s been a while since I’ve sat here and contemplated the direction of my life. Usually, I have everything so figured out. My life has become something I don’t recognize in the last week. I’m trying to hate it. To fight against it.

Especially now that I literally watched him murder a woman in cold blood.

The worst part is that I get it. Men like him… they’re a different breed. Normal people have something inside their brain that stops them from

acting out their impulses.

Someone threatens you? Okay, we move on. We call the cops. We do literally anything except cause them bodily harm. But people like Noah…

He's an anomaly.

Somehow… he's sweet, kind, loving, has the best cock known to the planet.

But he's also filled with this dark, brooding energy that can become explosive if rubbed the wrong way.

Hence… Dana now living with the sharks.

I'm not sure that I hate it. I certainly don't love it.

But I understand it.

The hardest pill for me to swallow is that I wanted a man who was feral. Who went feral to protect me. Who wants me so deeply under his skin that even a minor threat against me is taken at full scale.

Now that I have that, I'm growing obsessed with it.

Seeing Dana bleed out was… a lot. It was hard. I've never seen anyone die before. But it was also fascinating in a sick way.

And if I find that fascinating, am I really any better than he is? I don't think I'm capable of killing anyone, but the fact that he did, really doesn't bother me as much as it should.

He saw a threat, and he eliminated it. I am, at the very least, neutral on it all. It's just more that weird feeling of seeing someone die, or hang there dead, that is hard to get over. I suppose it's not unlike killing and skinning a deer for the first time.

That initial shock.

I'm trying so hard to hold onto any semblance of who I was before I came here, but it's like he literally walked off the pages of my journal and into my life and how the fuck do I argue with my damn self about my own fantasies?

I can't.

And that's why I'm struggling to just let go and give in.

Maybe if I… help him with something… cleaning or something. Get myself used to being around it. Get to know the way his mind works a little more, it will help me just jump in.

After all, I have no intentions of taking him to the police, so I'm just as guilty as he is at this point.

May as well do what I can to get used to having my dream man walking around, shirtless right now, mind you, and packing up our shit to move to a cabin he built for me.

Like, who does that?

Fuck, I'm all over the place. I want him. Need him, even.

One things for sure…

I won't be killing anyone myself.

But if he does it to protect me… I don't think I'll stop him.

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He built me a house, a beautiful house. Every thing I have ever wanted and more. But he killed Dana, ~~I really cant shouldn't wont~~ can I forgive that? He WAS protecting me. He Loves me. Do I fight this more. Do I love him? I think I might. I think what is sick of all is that I love how obsessed he is of me. I need to stop fighting this but I can't seem to stop those words from coming out of my mouth. What my heart and what my mouth say are 2 very different things. Just shut up mouth. He says he wants kids. DO I? I don't think I have a choice in the matter. I should hate that he makes all the decisions. BUT I love it at the same time. He also knows I journal. I am almost scared to go back and look to see if he has read anything. knowing him such a short time he would have put his 2 cents in where they shouldn't belong. But why is that also hot?

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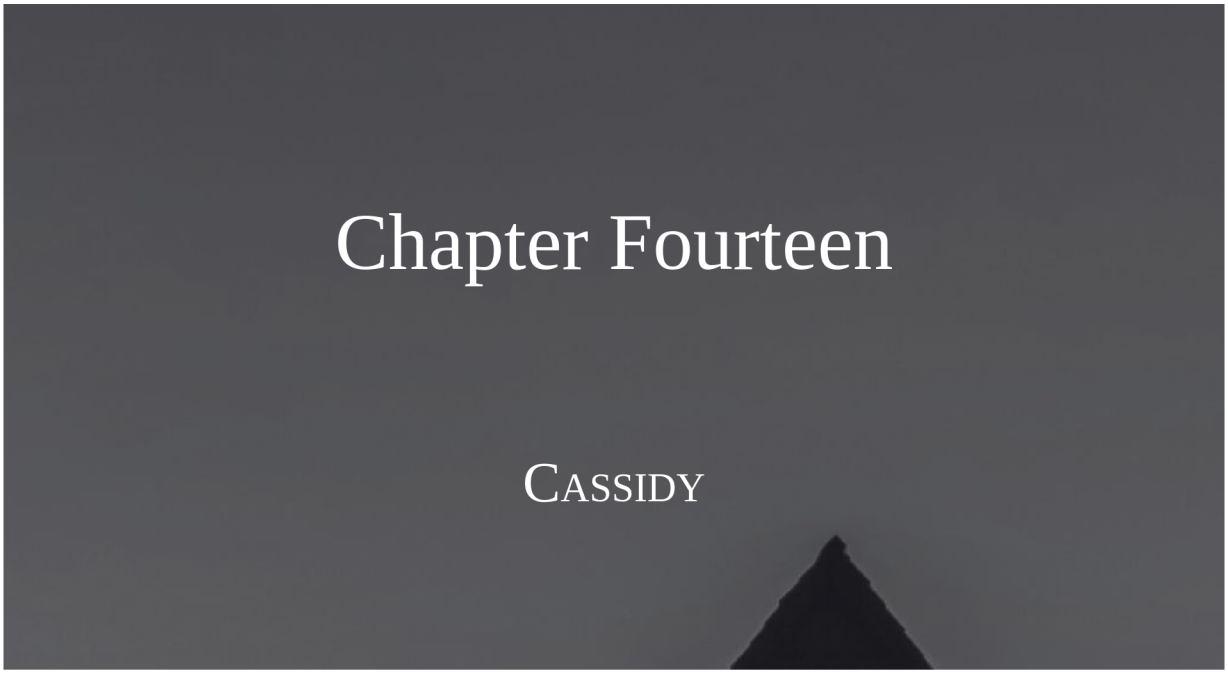

Chapter Fourteen

CASSIDY

WE SPEND THE MORNING moving everything over from the small cabin to the big one. The clothes he bought me, the gear, even some food from the fridge. He lets me pack it all while he makes a few trips without me, confident I won't risk another escape so soon after last night's attempt.

He's right, but not for the reason he thinks. I'm biding my time, waiting for another opening that will end with me pinned under him on the forest floor, too exhausted to keep my eyes open. As fucked as the last 24 hours have been… I want him more now than ever.

This cabin is a prison disguised as paradise, and I can't decide if the comfort makes it better or worse. After writing in my journal and getting out all the dark thoughts that I can't say out loud, I final reason that prison or not, kidnapping or not… I've come full circle to the idea of living out here like a mountain princess. Confronting my own darkness has released something in me.

An acceptance that all of us are capable of brutal, inhumane things. And it's up to us to decide if we can live with those things. I can. I can live with

Noah’s darkness so long as I can also tame it.

By the time we’re settled in, rain has started up again. It falls steadily against the roof like a reminder that there’s no way out of this without getting soaked to the bone.

I sit on the bed and stare out at the gray sky until I feel Noah’s presence beside me. He doesn’t say anything, just wraps an arm around my shoulders and holds me like he knows exactly how much I need it.

“Did you mean what you said?” My voice comes out quieter than I want it to.

He turns his head slightly, looking down at me with furrowed brows. “When?”

“About having a baby.”

His lips curve into a slow smile that makes my heart stutter against its better judgment. “Yes.”

“You’re insane,” I whisper for what feels like the hundredth time.

“Never said I wasn’t.”

He starts pulling his shirt off, then his pants before taking off his boxers and standing. “I’m going to shower.”

Seeing him like this… my eyes roam his body, despite myself. He is quite literally almost the perfect man… if he wasn’t so…

Obsessive.

But obsessive isn’t really the right word.

Possessive. All-consuming.

Deadly.

I think that’s the part that makes him a solid 9/10 on the perfection scale and not a full 10. I could do without the murder part, but if that’s what it

takes to have the rest, I suppose I could swallow my feelings. Maybe I can change him. I can put boundaries in place.

My mind is spinning in circles, trying to slow down as he stretches, his cock inches from my face before he turns and heads to the walk-in bathroom. My core clenches, even as my body's responses try to fight with the conflicting feelings still sitting in my mind.

Fuck if he doesn't do it for me. I groan, knowing I'm going to regret this decision, but making it anyway.

Standing, I quickly strip and follow him into the bathroom, watching as the water from the showerhead hits his body and drips onto the tiles beneath his feet. The shower doors are clear, and I can see every muscle, every dip, every hard plane of skin.

He turns and smirks, watching me, watching him. "You gonna just stand there, or are you going to get in?"

I bite my lip, a small thrill racing through me at the way he looks like he's ready to devour me whole. "I'll get in," I say, opening the door and stepping into the shower. The water is hot, scalding my skin in an attempt to thaw the cold that's seeped so deeply into me.

His hands are on me immediately, pulling me against him with a need that feels dangerous. "I was wondering how long you'd hold out," he murmurs into my neck, his breath warm against the steam.

"Not very," I admit, losing myself in the way his touch burns away everything but him.

He tilts my chin up and kisses me—slow and thorough and claiming every inch of me. His fingers tangle in my hair while the other hand moves down, tracing wet paths over my body until I'm gasping under his assault.

The water beats against us, drowning out everything except our ragged breaths and the insistent thud of my heart. His hands are everywhere at once, each touch unraveling more of the resolve I pretend to have left.

“Tell me you won’t leave,” he says against my lips, and there’s nothing playful about it this time.

A tremor runs through me as I cling to him, trying to remember that he just murdered an innocent woman the night before. But it appears all coherent thoughts have fled my mind as his fingers tickle my inner thighs. “You know I can’t promise that. But I am trying my best to understand you. And understand me. I’m learning things about me… they’re big, scary things. Things I’d always suppressed. But I am trying, Noah. I’m doing my best to come to terms with all of this. It’s been a long wait for you, but for me this has moved at a breakneck pace. Please… at least just try to understand that.”

He rewards my honesty by lifting me easily, pinning me between the hard wall and his body. His mouth crashes down on mine again with an intensity that sends sparks skittering across my skin.

The room spins as he thrusts into me with bruising force; it’s desperate and raw and without pretense—an offering of everything he is, and everything he demands from me.

I moan into his mouth, the sound muffled by the way he swallows it greedily. My legs wrap around his waist as he takes me over that jagged edge again and again, each thrust pushing me further into a world where nothing exists but us.

His grip on my hair tightens just enough to remind me who’s in control, even though I know it’s only a matter of time before that balance shifts again. Before I find another moment to run and make him hunt me down.

But right now, it’s all heat and friction and the terrifying thrill of surrender.

“Fuck,” he groans into my neck as we both shatter, his body pinning mine against the shower wall with a final, shuddering drive.

We stay there for a long moment, our breaths mingling with steam until they return to something other than ragged gasps. Then he pulls back slightly to look at me, his eyes dark and filled with a wild mix of triumph and unrelenting devotion.

“You’re mine, Cassidy,” he says, this time like a gentle plea instead of a demand.

My heart is too tangled up in all things Noah, to do anything but nod in response. He lowers me onto unsteady legs, keeping close so I don’t collapse entirely.

The water streams over us as I try to find my balance—in more ways than one. His hand brushes my cheek, tender in its possession.

“I’ll never give up on you. However long it takes for you to understand that we are meant to be together.”

And I know he’s telling the truth.

He bends, grabbing my favorite shampoo and squirts it onto his hand, bringing it to my hair and working it into my scalp. He massages my head before washing my hair, the feeling sending tingles down my body.

He cares for me. That much I know to be true. But how can I hold two truths in my mind, both so opposing in their nature, and reconcile them into this man I’ll be spending my life with?

The water begins to run cold as we finish up, and he turns it off, grabbing a towel from the rack and wrapping me in it before toweling himself down.

We dress in silence, but it’s comfortable now. Almost natural. His presence is less suffocating in this big space, and I feel how I did before...

Safe.

“You want to watch the storm?” He asks jerking his head towards the falls.

I nod, “Yeah. That’d be nice.”

We sit on the floor in front of the large window, watching as the rain comes down in sheets over the trees. The falls are raging almost as hard as my thoughts.

“You’re a fucking lunatic,” I say quietly, but there’s no real venom behind it.

“Would you love me any other way?” He pulls me closer, and I let him.

“I don’t know if I can love you at all.”

He kisses my hair, seemingly unfazed by my honesty. “You do love me, Cassidy. If you didn’t you wouldn’t crave my touch the way you do. You’d have gone running for the hills the minute you saw Dana, but you didn’t. Well, you did. But you came back. You could have tried to go, to leave me, to kill me or go to the cops. But you didn’t. Even now, I can see you wrestling with the fact that the nature of who I am scares you, but not because I’m a bad man. Rather because it’s showing you that you’re really not that different to me. You want the darkness because it means you’ll always be safe with me. I’ll always do what’s necessary to protect you. To keep you safe.”

He pauses, making sure I’m listening before continuing. “You won’t leave me, Cassidy, because if you leave, you’re walking out on the one man in the world who doesn’t care about consequences so long as you’re safe.”

I sigh, leaning into him as the storm builds outside and inside of me. We sit there for hours until the rain finally stops, and night falls over the cabin. The sky clears just enough for a few stars to peek through.

“The rain stopped,” I say softly, more to myself than to him as I crane my neck to see the stars.

“I know a place where we can see them better,” he murmurs into my hair.

I tilt my head back to look at him, a question in my eyes.

“Do you trust me not to run from you?” I ask.

“Do you trust me not to hunt you down if you do, tie you up, and make you suck my cock until I come down your throat?” He grins like he knows exactly how much I hate that I do trust him, even after everything.

My thighs clench. “Maybe I want you to.”

Maybe I should try to run. To test him. See what he will do to me. I want him to wreck me, destroy me, make me scream his name. A dam breaks inside me as I realize with certainty that I want his primal, feral side. I want him to take away my control, to own me, to live under my skin, forcing me to take his cock until I can’t anymore.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

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What the fuck is wrong with me? This man is a lunatic and I fuck him in the shower. AND OMG he knows how to fuck in the shower. The way he is able to touch me and knows all the right places to make me want to beg for it. To make me want to take that cock and shove it into one of my .. See this what I mean. I shouldn't want this BUT its all I want all I NEED! I told him I don't think I could ever love him. Saying this tasted like a lie on my tongue. But he looked me straight in the eye and felt like into my soul and told me just why I will love him. He is right of course. I hate that he is always right.

xoxo

Mrs. Cassidy Cross

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Chapter Fifteen

Noah

SHE WANTS TO SEE the stars, so the stars she will see. I know this whole murder thing has hit her hard, but I feel like she's coming around to the idea that everything I've done… it's all for her.

If she chose to leave, if I *let* her leave, she would find her previous life to be lacking the depth and color it has now. Cement, paperwork, meaningless conversation with assholes who just want to use her.

Friendships that serve no purpose beyond the menial, everyday chit chat that leads to nothing but mind-numbing boredom.

That's not what life should be about. She's slowly realizing this. I can see it in the way she's tilting her head up, trying to point out the constellations as I lead her up the hill, towards the cliff. The *other* way from the hunting cabin.

No need to set her off again. She's coming around to the idea of accepting who she really is. Who I saw her to be through the lens of her journals. Where she was uninhibited with her ramblings.

The *true* Cassidy.

Speaking of the hunting cabin, I'll need to leave her tonight to clean the mess Dana left. Frustration coils in my gut. I don't want to leave my girl, especially in the fragile state of mind that she's in, but I have no real choice. The cabin must be cleaned before Kairo arrives because heaven knows one day he's going to fuck up and I don't want *my* DNA all over the place.

But for now… I pull her down onto the grass with me and we sprawl out, looking up.

"Is that the Big Dipper?" She points up.

I track where her finger is pointing and nod. "And just over there," I say, moving my hand slightly to the left. "That's Cassiopeia."

She turns her head to look at me, a small smile playing on her lips. "Of course you know that one."

"Why wouldn't I?" I smirk, soaking in the way she seems lighter out here, more at ease.

"You sure it's not some ploy to make me think you're romantic?" She teases, but there's no accusation in her tone.

"I don't need tricks to make you see that." I grasp her hand, running my thumb along her knuckles. "You'll realize it soon enough."

"I'm starting to think maybe you're right," she admits softly, completely enamored with the stars in the sky.

We lay there for what feels like hours, watching the show unfold above us. The stars are bright and infinite, reminding me of how endless this place is —and how small everything else seems in comparison.

People often inflate their importance. They often think that their lives are the most interesting thing to ever hit this planet. That their problems are so vast, so infinite that they will go on forever.

They forget that there are billions of other people here, living, breathing, struggling just as much as they are.

They forget that there are stars and planets and universes beyond what they can see. And they forget that if they scope outside of their pathetic existence for just a moment, they will see how small, how tiny, how insignificant they are to the planet as a whole.

No one will remember their name. Not beyond their children and perhaps their grandchildren, if they're lucky enough to survive that long.

There won't be accolades written about them, there won't be monuments testifying to their existence.

Everyone is here for but a moment in time and then wiped from the very memory of this planet.

But people want to feel important. They want to 'win' at life, when there are no winners, no losers.

Just an existence you choose to follow, a path you choose to take.

And in that existence, if all the little moments that you experience are ones that bring you stress, defeat and failure, then why bother living at all?

That is why I chose to step outside of the neatly made boxes that people live in. Why I live out here, why I took Cassidy.

Because at the end of the day, I see in her, what I have in me.

The yearning to be free of the chains that try telling us who we can be, what we can become.

I could have been anyone. A lawyer. A cop. A politician. There was endless money at my disposal to mold myself into a specific image, to achieve a specific goal.

But the real question is *why*?

And no one stops to truly ask themselves *why* do we do the things we do? Why do we strive for a life of mediocrity, one that will be forgotten in a couple of generations anyway, when our souls long to be free?

“Would you ever let me go back to the city? To see my friends?” Her question is hesitant, breaking the silence between us.

“No,” I tell her truthfully. “But I don’t think you have anyone worth seeing anyway.”

Cassidy breathes out slowly, still looking up at the stars. She doesn’t pull away from me; instead, she presses closer.

“That’s what scares me,” she says quietly. “That my old life is starting to feel more and more distant. That you knew what I needed, when I didn’t even know myself.”

I turn onto my side and pull her against me, feeling the heat of her body through our clothes. She’s cold but doesn’t mention it. Doesn’t even shiver.

“I’m sorry you had to see what I did to Dana.”

“I’m not,” she says, surprising us both. “I think I needed to see it. I think I needed to understand you better. Up until that moment, you’ve been a mystery to me. I also think I had to understand that part of me that you’ve been slowly uncovering.”

It’s the first time she’s admitted needing anything since I took her. The first time she hasn’t outright rejected this life when I’m not balls deep inside her with my clearly magical cock. It sends a thrill through me that I can barely contain.

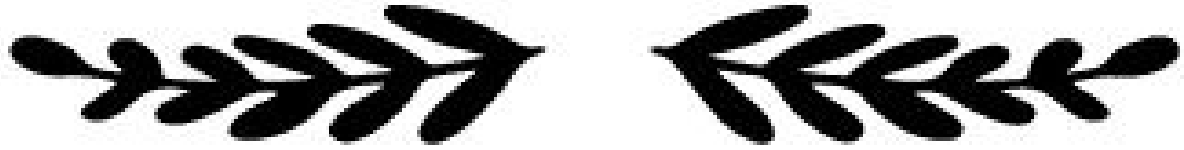
“Is that what you want?” I ask against her ear. “Need? To know me better?”

I’m ready to take her again, here under the stars, but she shifts and looks at me with those wide eyes nailing me in place.

“I don’t know,” she says. “That’s what scares me too.”

I hold her as the sky turns, keeping her pressed against my chest until I feel her breathing even out into sleep. She doesn't know yet, but that fear is good for us. It keeps her on edge, lets me push her further than she'd ever go on her own.

Cassidy will always need a little chaos to make her feel alive; and I'm just the man to give her what she needs to thrive.



The sun is high when we wake, and we're damp from dew. Cassidy yawns and stretches like a satisfied cat before getting up, dusting herself off.

"How far is the lodge from here?" She asks as we start walking back to our new cabin.

"Why?"

"Because," she says cautiously, testing my mood as much as the ground beneath us. "I was thinking maybe I should take you up on that job offer."

I try to keep the surprise from my face but fail miserably. "You were pretty set against it yesterday." We walk in silence for a beat. "It's a half an hour walk."

"I think I'd like to stay busy."

I eye her, looking for any sign that she's trying to pull the wool over my eyes and to my surprise, find none. "Okay… I can get you set up in the system, but Cassidy, if you're planning something, I suggest you stop."

"I'm not. I've been thinking about my life back… home… and after seeing the stars, this knot in my chest released. It's like… everything I ever worked for, just didn't matter. I don't know how to describe it."

“You don’t have to, I know exactly what you mean.” I hesitate, hating that I need to say it, but she needs to know. “Cass, I have to go back to the hunting cabin. There’s a mess I need to attend.”

She looks at me. “Can I come with?”

“Um.” I’m truly at a loss for words. *Do I let her see how I dispose of bodies? Will she want to help me clean? How much of who I am do I really want to show her?* “Uh. Sure. I guess.”

“Great, I’ll just shower quick and throw on some grubbies and you can show me what needs to be done.”

We walk into the cabin and before she can head upstairs to shower, I grab her hand. “Why do you want to see this part, Cassidy? Why the change?”

She simply smiles, “I figure if I’m going to take charge of my own life, take control of my destiny, if you will, and live with a man who would murder people to keep me safe, the least I can do is help him clean up. Besides, I saw her bleed to death, the clean up can’t be worse than that. I dunno, Noah. I told you I’ll try and I am. It doesn’t make me as mad as it should, I think is what I’m trying to say.”

This is weird. I feel weird about this, but I can’t tell if I’ve broken her. Did something truly shift or did something break last night? Fuck…

I make a snap decision. “Fine. But if anything starts to get off the rails, you let me know and I’ll bring you back down to the cabin, alright?”

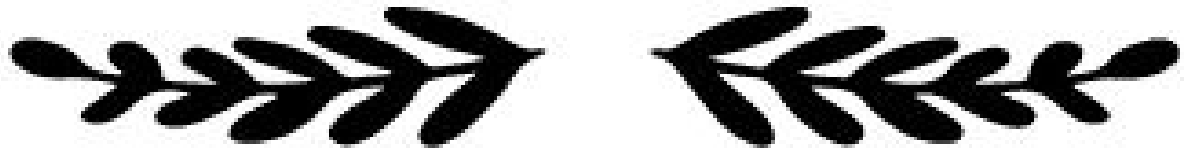
She’s already halfway up the stairs, “Okay!”

When she comes back down, I almost don’t recognize her. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun and she’s wearing one of my old hoodies with a pair of sweats. She looks cute as fuck.

“Ready?” She beams at me.

I’m still not sure what to make of this version of Cassidy, but I know I want her just as much as every other one she’s been since she got here. So, I’m willing to take the risk that she’s finally come around.

“Ready,” I say, hoping I’m not making a mistake by letting her get this close to the parts of me that don’t see the light of day.



Dana is still hanging when we get there, the bucket overflowing, her blood dried on the floor.

Cassidy steps inside the cabin without hesitation, a curious expression on her face. Her eyes travel over everything, lingering on the blood stains and then on Dana’s body, pale and stiff above the bucket. She looks like something out of a horror movie, but Cassidy doesn’t flinch; if anything, she seems fascinated.

Jesus Christ… maybe seeing Dana really did flip a switch in her. She’s gone through the stages of grief and has landed on acceptance. I hope, anyway. I hold my breath for a few heartbeats before exhaling in relief. “It might get messier before it gets clean,” I warn.

She turns to look at me, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’re serious about this?” I ask, searching her face for any sign that she’ll bolt again.

Instead, she moves closer with an expression I can’t quite read. “Show me.”

I nod slowly, “The bleach is under the sinks over there. I’m going to get her down and take her to the cliffs.”

“Why the cliffs?”

Shit. “It’s where the bodies get dumped. The ocean takes them away.”

“How many times have you done this?” She doesn’t look at me as she asks, rummaging through the cupboards under the sink for the bleach and some cloths.

“A few.”

“Why?” She stands, a grin on her face as she holds out the bleach and a rag.

“They all deserved it, Cassidy. You’ll learn about who deserves it and who doesn’t over time. The bottom line is… anyone who threatens my way of life, goes over the cliff.”

“Seems simple enough.” She says with a shrug, grabbing a plastic bucket and pouring bleach into it before filling the rest with water.

My eyes narrow. “Are you experiencing PTSD? Why are you so calm about this all of a sudden?”

She turns to face me, her hands on her hip as she glares at me. “Because, Noah, as I was looking at the stars, I realized that I want to look out at them every night. I want to hear the water rushing from the falls. I want to smell the spring blooms. I hated being a lawyer, when I really boil it down to the basics. I loved defending people, but hated everything else. I fucking *hate* Carter. I hate the speed of my life. Truthfully, I think I hated Stuart, too. I was doing what was expected of me, because that’s all I knew. Despite the fact that you went about this all wrong, I like you, feel something for you, and if you’d have asked nicely, I would have said yes. You just made it so the yes wasn’t an option, and no wasn’t either. I think that’s what I needed. Someone to take the reigns and make a life altering decision for me, otherwise I’d be stuck, until I die, doing shit I don’t like, for people I can’t

stand, going home to my empty apartment and pining over a man I found railing our secretary. In our bed, mind you."

I let my breath out slowly, feeling the truth of her words sink in.

"So," she continues, "are you going to let me help or what?"

I don't need any more convincing. I grab the rope and unhook Dana from her spot on the wall, dragging her body outside while Cassidy starts scrubbing. The blood has dried and set on the concrete floor as she splashes her bucket over the stains. It starts running in small rivers that gather into pools, staining the cement with a brownish hue.

It's a mess, and irritation spikes up my spine, but Cassidy tackles it with determination, her expression focused as she works. I watch her for a beat longer than necessary before hauling Dana out to the cliffs.

The wind is fierce and cold as I make my way to the edge, Dana's body thumping behind me as it catches on rocks and roots. She's heavier than Mike was; not physically, but emotionally. Something about this body feels different—like it's tethered to more than just dead weight. Like I'm letting go of something bigger than her.

The fear of a life without Cassidy. Something seems to have clicked, and if that was Dana's death, then she did some good in her miserable life.

I kick her over the side without much effort, watching as she tumbles down to join Mike below. He's long gone, but perhaps somewhere in their watery grave, they will find each other. Waves crash over her bodies and send sprays of cold sea water up into the air, stinging my skin as I turn away from them.

It's done.

Back in the cabin, Cassidy is still scrubbing furiously at the floor. She looks up when I come in, strands of hair sticking to her face where sweat has

dampened them.

“Well?” Her eyes are wide with something that looks like exhilaration.

“Gone,” I say simply.

She nods and turns back to her task as I grab more rags and get down on my knees beside her.

We work in silence, the only sound the splash of bleach and the rustle of clothes as we scrub away the evidence. She’s not squeamish about this life—or if she is, she’s doing a damn good job of hiding it. I steal glances at her as she works. She’s perfect.

After a while, Cassidy sits back on her heels, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “That’s the last of it,” she says, surveying our work.

“Not bad for a city girl.” I’m trying to keep my voice casual.

She stands and stretches, a satisfied smile playing at the corners of her lips. “And you said it’d be hard.”

“I’ll have to bring you along more often.” It’s half a joke to test her reaction, but when she doesn’t flinch or tell me to fuck myself, I know we’ve crossed into new territory.

“Are we done?” Her eyes are bright, eager.

“Depends,” I say, pulling her towards me. “How dirty do you feel?”

Her laugh is breathless as I wrap my arms around her waist. “You don’t waste any time.”

“Not when it comes to you.” I bury my face in her neck, breathing in the scent of bleach and sweat and Cassidy—a wild mix that makes my pulse spike.

“So, it doesn’t matter that I stink like chemicals and hard work?” She teases as my hands find their way under her hoodie.

“No,” I say, pulling my hand back out, “But bleach on skin is bad, so let’s go wash our hands and run to the cabin to shower. I want to fuck you raw.”

She gasps and rushes to the sink, washing her hands vigorously before turning to me, “Can we try something?”

I step in and wash mine, drying them on some paper towel before we head out and close the door behind us. “Sure.”

“I feel weird asking, but can you put on your mask and chase me? Like you did before?” Her cheeks turn beet red as she stares at the ground while we walk.

“Hmmm, you liked that did you?” I chuckle and grab her hand, brushing her knuckles across my lips. “Oh, minx, if fear gets you off, I will terrify you any day.”

“Can you also tie me up… and have your way with me?”

“Oh? I don’t see that as being a problem.” My cock strains against my pants. I stop walking, grabbing her hand and making her cup my pants. “Maybe losing control is the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

She groans as she palms my cock, “If you keep fucking me like you do, then I’d agree. I *might* even agree to let you put a baby in me.”

“Oh, there’s no choice in that, Cassidy. I *will* put a baby in you, it’s just a matter of time.”

“I’ve got the implant.” She says, smiling as if she’s won.

I pull her hand off my dick and wave her words off. “Nothing a bit of home surgery can’t cure.”

She gasps, “You would *not!*”

“I definitely would.” My hand comes down hard on her ass, “Run, little minx, my cock can only get so hard before I start fighting the need to fuck you where you stand.”

With a squeal, she takes off running towards our home.

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Noah took me to see the stars. It was so magical, it was at that moment under those stars that I knew I was staying and that I did indeed love Noah. Not only that but I hated, full on hated my old life. We needed to clean up the Dana mess. I think he was worried I was going to break but I needed to show him that we are a team. I am with him in this. My mess is his and his mess is mine. He thinks he is going to pregnate me but I have an implant that has to be taken out by the DR. But maybe I should be worried because he does get crazy about these things.

YOU FINALLY GET IT...

MRS. CROSS

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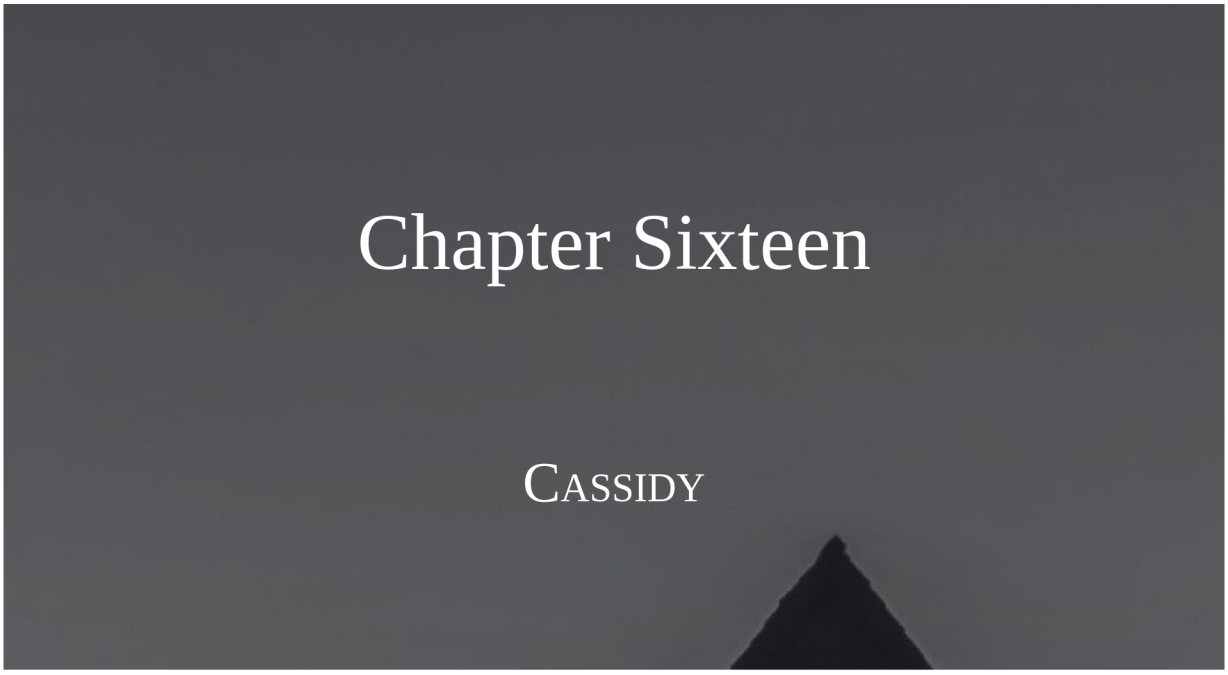


Chapter Sixteen

CASSIDY

EVERYTHING IS ODDLY QUIET as I exit the shower. Well, was forced to exit the shower. The water turned off. Thank God I'd at least washed the soap off of me and was just spending a few minutes in quiet under the water. The cabin is dark, except for three candles in the bedroom. I try flicking on a light, but it doesn't turn on.

What the fuck?

"Noah? The electricity is down."

No answer.

"Noah?"

Shit.

I grab some clothes from my drawers, pulling on a t-shirt, some sweats, socks and a thick sweater. Grabbing a candle, I start heading downstairs. On the floor are arrows that point to the open cabin door. *Ooooh, I get it now…* I head towards the door, only to see a note pinned to the frame with his hunting knife.

Start running little minx… if you dare.

My heart pounds in my chest despite the fact that I know I asked for this. I want to see him at his most feral. I want to feel him as he takes me in that state. I need to feel powerless.

To surrender control to something more. Something deeper.

Taking a deep breath, I step out into the night. The air is crisp and cold, but I barely notice as adrenaline spikes through my veins. The wind is fierce, and I shiver as it cuts through the fabric of my sweater. My heart pounds even harder as I head in the direction of the falls, the flickering candle casting shadows that dance wildly along the gravel path. My hand cups around the flame, trying to keep it alight, but it’s no use, one small gust and it dies.

Throwing the candle to the side, I start jogging. It’s silent except for my own breathing, but I know he’s out there somewhere, watching me.

Stalking me.

I know this area well enough now to navigate even in the dark, but there’s an edge of danger that makes everything seem amplified. Twigs snap beneath my feet, and somewhere in the distance a branch cracks loudly.

How long before he catches up?

The thought sends a thrill through me, and I break into a sprint. It’s exhilarating—the fear, the anticipation—and I push myself faster until my breathing comes in ragged gasps.

The clouds are thick, blotting out any hope of moonlight to guide me. A split-second decision and I veer off toward the narrow path leading back to where we watched the stars last night. It’s not far now, if I can just make it there—

A rustle from behind stops me dead in my tracks.

I turn, holding my breath.

Nothing.

Straining my eyes to see, all there is around me is darkness. The clouds shift for a moment, the moon lighting up the path and I take off running.

Then another sound—a low whistle from somewhere to my left. It echoes through the trees, and a shiver races up my spine.

He's close.

My legs are getting tired as I run, but I keep pushing harder.

Then I see him, a shadow in the night as he steps out from behind a tree in front of me. The mask is terrifying and beautiful, the white hearts bright against the dark.

I let out a scream that's half surprise, half excitement before spinning on my heels and darting back toward the cabin. My feet pound against the ground, each step bringing him that much closer.

He doesn't make a sound as he follows, but I can feel him gaining on me. It's relentless, his pursuit—a force of nature that demands surrender. My breath comes in short, desperate bursts as I race down the trail.

The cabin comes into view, and I know he's right behind me; I can sense his presence like a pulse in the night.

"Cassidy," he calls out, his voice dark and playful.

My heart leaps at the sound of my name, and I push myself even harder for those last few steps. I reach the porch and throw myself inside.

But it's too late. He tackles me to the ground just as I cross through the door, pinning me beneath him with crushing certainty.

"No!" I gasp in protest as he holds me down.

"Yes," he growls, the mask so close to my face that all I see are those wild eyes burning through it.

I squirm beneath him, trying to wrench free. He lets me struggle without loosening his grip—lets me fight until my muscles give out and we're both panting from exertion.

He grabs my ankles and drags me across the floor, dumping me outside on the moss before he descends, pulling off my sweater and my shirt before hoisting me up and over his shoulder. He lumbers towards the tree just ahead and sets me down as I try swinging. Grabbing my hand, he loops the rope around my wrist, throwing the other end around a branch before grabbing my other hand and tying it.

I'm strung up, my flesh goose bumping as the cold hits it, my nipples hard. He growls, his hands rough against my skin as he cups my breast, palming it before ripping down my sweats.

"No underwear? Naughty girl."

I squirm against the ropes, my body involuntarily arching toward him as he steps back to admire his work.

"Untie me," I demand.

He laughs low and hungry, the sound sending shockwaves through me. "I don't think I will," he says, slipping out of his clothes until he's naked in the moonlight.

My mouth goes dry at the sight of him, and a moan escapes my lips. He moves with deliberate slowness until he's pressed against me, his cock hard against my stomach. My skin burns everywhere he touches as he kisses a trail along my throat.

I gasp, losing myself in the intensity of it all. In the wild thrill of being caught and trussed up like this.

His hands roam down my body, fingers dipping between my legs to feel how wet I am for him. "Fucking soaked," he murmurs, stroking me until

I’m trembling and panting his name.

“Noah…” It comes out a plea.

He brings that hand up to his mask, lifting the bottom, licking me off his fingers. A groan rumbles through his chest.

My body betrays all reason and presses into him as he slips a finger inside me, then two.

“Yes!” The word tears from my throat as I grind against his hand. The binding on my wrists is tight enough to hold firm but not hurt; just enough to leave marks that remind us both who I belong to by the end of this.

His thumb finds my clit and he works it until I’m about to explode before he pulls back and I moan in protest.

“Fuck, no, don’t do this to me,” I cry out.

“Oh, little minx, I’ll be doing so much more. You’re going to be a wet mess by the time I’m done with you.”

He moves behind me, spreading my cheeks as he wets his finger inside my pussy before bringing it up and pushing against my back entrance. The sensation is new, burning ever so slightly before it feels good. He reaches around to flick my clit as he slowly moves his finger in and out. I don’t know what feels better and I’m helpless to do anything but let him do what he wants to me.

“Fuck, Cass, I’m going to come just feeling you.” He pulls his finger out and I feel the blunt end of his cock sliding down my ass before it nudges my pussy.

I push my ass back, trying to force him into me.

He grips my hips and laughs, pulling back just enough to drive me insane before thrusting forward. The force makes my arms strain against the ropes as he fills me. I cry out as he sets a punishing rhythm—each thrust sending

shockwaves through me, each desperate gasp leaving me more breathless than the last.

I'm right there, on the edge, but he pulls out and leaves me empty and shaking.

"No! Please! Oh god, please don't stop."

"Beg for it," he says, his voice rough with need.

"I'm begging," I cry, tears seeping from my eyes. "Please, Noah, please."

His mouth is at my ear, his breath hot against my skin. I can feel him so close, so hard it's almost painful not to have him inside me. "I want to hear you *beg*."

"Fuck me!" I scream. "Please!"

He lets out a growl that's almost feral as he plunges into me again—harder, deeper, wild and relentless. His fingers find my clit as he drags us both toward the edge of oblivion.

The world goes white around the edges as I come apart on his cock. My pulse pounds in my ears as I shatter around him, every nerve firing in blinding ecstasy until all that's left is his name echoing on my lips.

"Cassidy!" He groans as he comes inside me. "Such a perfect little slut for me."

I nod, my body struggling to stay rigid enough not to dangle from my wrists.

He notices my wince and steps forward, cupping my chin and kissing me with bruising force. "I'll let you down in just a second. There's one small thing I need to do first."

Bending down, he grabs his jeans, fishing around in the pocket before pulling out a survival knife.

Oh fuck… no…

“What are you doing, Noah?”

“What I promised I’d do, Cassidy.” He flicks it open, pulling off his mask as his free hand searches along my arm for the birth control implant. He grins when he feels the bump. “This will sting, but I promise I’ll make it better.”

He slices into my skin quickly and I release a scream as it burns and stings, blood pooling on my arm before he’s fishing it out, snapping it between his fingers and dropping it on the ground. “There. Much better. Let’s get you down, baby.”

He unties the ropes, and I rear back and slam my fist into his face. “You motherfucker! You didn’t warn me, didn’t prepare me! Nothing!”

He chuckles, wiping the blood from his split lip on his shirt sleeve. “I deserved that, but don’t make it a habit. You won’t get in another shot. Come, I have whiskey and glue, let’s patch that up.”

Picking me up, he cradles me as he carries me towards the cabin, not bothering to pick up our clothes. I help out by opening the door and he sets me down on the couch, rushing to grab a blanket and draping it over me as he gets the fire going.

“I’m gonna go out and turn the electricity back on.” He says, leaving me for a couple of minutes before returning.

“About that whiskey…” I say. “And don’t think I’ve forgiven you. I’m not ready for babies, Noah. I’ve only just come around to the idea of living as your wild forest queen.”

“You’ll change your mind.” He strokes my hair, admiring the deep red stain of blood on my arm. “You always do.”

“Go get me some whiskey and a bandage.”

He heads to the kitchen and grabs two tumblers, pouring three fingers of booze in each before rummaging through the cupboards and coming back with a first aid kit.

I'm clutching my arm against my chest when he sits down beside me, handing me a glass. The liquid burns as it goes down; not as much as the slice in my arm did, though.

"Give me that. Gonna sting," he says, taking my arm and dabbing it with alcohol. I hiss and he chuckles again. "Told you it would sting." He cleans up the blood with practiced ease, then applies the skin glue to seal it shut, pressing gauze against it before wrapping it in a bandage.

"If this leaves a scar…"

"It will," he interrupts. "And you'll wear it proudly."

"You're lucky I asked for this life. You'd be in jail right now if I hadn't come around."

He grins, "Oh minx, no jail can hold me. And I'd find you if I had to burn the whole thing down."

"Lucky me," I deadpan, but there's an undercurrent of affection in my voice now.

"I think so." He pulls me into his lap, tucking the blanket around me and kissing my forehead. "How's your arm?"

"Hurts," I say truthfully, snuggling against him.

"I'll make you forget about that soon enough."

We sit there with our whiskey, watching as the fire grows in the fireplace. It's comfortable.

Natural.

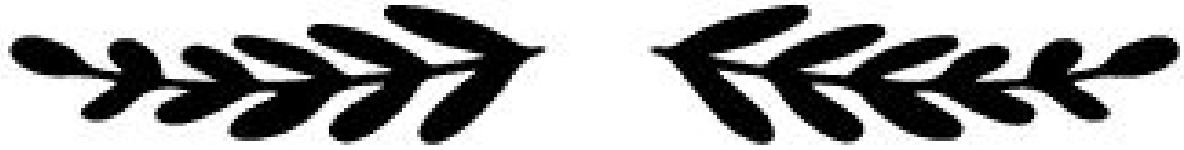
As if we've been doing this forever. As if it's the only thing we were ever meant to do.

Maybe it is.

I finish my drink and let the warmth seep into me, feeling drowsy and content in a way I never thought possible.

“You’re a real piece of work,” I mumble, eyes growing heavy as I drift off in his arms. “But I love you anyway.”

His dark laugh is the last thing I hear before sleep drags me under.



It’s still early when I wake. Noah is asleep beside me, holding me tight against him like he thinks I’ll vanish if he lets go for even a second. His face is relaxed, the usual intensity replaced by something almost gentle. It’s more than I can take this early in the morning.

I wriggle out from his grasp as carefully as I can, trying not to wake him. My arm throbs, but it’s manageable—especially after seeing what Dana went through. My god… seeing her like that was a shock, but not nearly as much as finding out how much I wanted to be with this madman after it all.

And that was the biggest shock of all.

I grab his t-shirt off the floor and slip it over my head before heading into the kitchen. There’s still blood on the hem and that in itself is enough of a warning about what this life will be like.

But if it means being with him—completely, without restraint—then maybe the darkness isn’t so terrifying after all.

What does terrify me is how quickly I’ve adapted to all of this. How natural it feels even when everything should be screaming at me to run far and fast. How alive I feel when I’m with him.

That’s the real danger.

I start a pot of coffee, moving quietly so I don’t wake him yet. There’s something about this morning—about the quiet before I start my usual shenanigans—that I want to savor for just a little longer.

The smell of coffee rouses him, and by the time I’ve poured our mugs he’s standing behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me close. “Morning,” he says, his voice heavy with sleep and satisfaction.

“Morning.” I lean back against him, feeling warmth spread from where our bodies touch. “Coffee?”

“Mmmm,” he presses his lips to my neck. “And then some.”

“You’re insatiable.”

“For you? Always.” He kisses my shoulder before taking a mug from my hands.

We sit at the kitchen table, our legs tangled together beneath it as we drink the steaming brew. I’m buzzing with caffeine and adrenaline by the time we finish, the pain in my arm barely a blip on the radar of everything else I feel.

“So, how are you feeling this morning?” Noah asks.

It surprises me. He never asks me how I am. It’s domestic.

Sweet.

“Good, actually. Hoping we can go get me started on my job. You know, before the place falls apart now that there’s no receptionist anymore.”

He chuckles. “I’ve already got the paperwork in the system. Dana is taking a nice long vacation, and no one will question it because well… I own the place.”

I eye him and start laughing until I see he’s serious.

“Of course you do.” It doesn’t even surprise me because it all makes total sense.

I truly have become the forest princess.

And the thought of ruling these paths beside him makes me feel some kind of way.

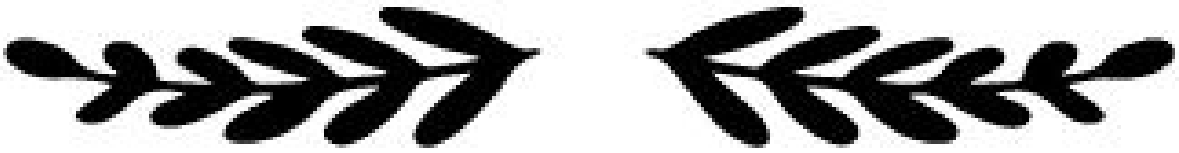
Like how I would have ever managed to walk away from all of this without regretting it for the rest of my life.

But I didn’t. I chose right, and with Noah’s hand wrapped around mine as the sun starts shining, a smile graces my face.

Happiness is what you choose to make of it, and I choose this.

Right here.

With my soul mate.



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There’s a little bundle of joy involved, if you get my drift.

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I got out of the shower and the power was off... I KNEW IT! He did read my journals! He chased me though the woods then fucked me like a wild animal. I can not wait to do again. I hope he ties me up and degrades me next time. After we got done, that Mother Fucker held me down and cut my birth control out. I almost had another orgasm right there. It was so hot the way he just stared me down and did it with no regret. Its why I love him. He will probably fuck me on every surface of this house every chance he gets and I will be wet and ready and willing. No matter how much of a fight I put up. I will be preganat in no time. Truthfully I just want to be married first, but soon...

Noah, if you're reading this...
you were right

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About Haven Snow

Haven Snow writes dark romance, specifically stalkers, mafia and dark academy. She loves hot tea, reading and relaxing on the beach.

You can find all things Haven right here.or on her socials: @havensnowwrites

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